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# INQUIRY

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# Introduction

Students want answers. Most of our students, at least, expect us to provide the answers to their questions, the *real* answers. If we teach history, we must know what really happened, and when it happened, and who or what made it happen. If we teach biology, we must know how living organisms are put together, and what really makes them tick. If we teach English, we must know whether this or that sentence is or is not grammatical, and what the author of this or that novel really meant. If we teach speech, we must know how to present and project and persuade, and whether and when to palliate or provoke our audience. It is not surprising, and not altogether wrong, that students seek answers from their teachers. If we manage to provide answers for our students, at least once in a while, we're surely doing part of our job. But we all know that it's their best questions that really get a class rolling.

Good students ask good questions. And so do good teachers. In fact, it may be that the real measure of a teacher, or the best measure, is the sorts of questions she or he asks. What does Professor so-and-so really want to know? What does Professor you-know-who really wonder about?

As you read through this edition of *Inquirer*, you will encounter many questions. Not least among them are these fourteen: What is required to *understand* a text? (Aslanian). What is the role of *things* in reading and writing? (Delano). Is it a good idea to tell your students stories? (Dewprashad). What's the point of the *freewrite*? (Estes). How can teachers *collaborate* to make their teaching more effective? (Gastón, Han & Lee). How can we teach students not just what our discipline says, but how it *thinks*? (Gourgey). How can we create true *communicative* reciprocity between ourselves and our students? (Haynes). What can and cannot be accomplished in an online teaching environment? (Is-serles). What do our students know of *Time*? (Jorif). Do health fairs deliver the *awareness* they promise to our students? (McNamara). Who struggles to speak and who will *listen*? (Metcalf). How can the privately fearful learn to speak publicly? (Oumano). How can we help our students *map* the journey toward their future? (Palit). Can teaching students to read better teach them to write better? (Plaisir). And, perhaps the question of all pedagogical questions, what *sorts* of questions do we ask our students? (Wissinger).

These are but the most apparent of the questions raised in this issue of *Inquirer*. Rest assured, the authors do provide a few answers to them, and to many others as well. But these articles are also a testament to the depth of each author's curiosity, and to the breadth of the pedagogical wondering that goes on in the classrooms and offices and halls of BMCC. *What is this thing called teaching, really?* And how can we manage to do it better—even better—than we do? Read on and perhaps you'll come up with a question or two of your own. You can save the answers for another day.

Matthew Ally  
Mabel Asante



# Text, the Tip of the Iceberg

Yeghia Aslanian

## *Developmental Skills*

Reading is basically a dialogue between the text (writer) and the reader; and for this dialogue to be meaningful and productive, the reader must be on “the same page” with the writer; i.e., the reader must have the relevant background knowledge. The purpose of this brief exposition is to walk the reader through the analysis of the content of a newspaper column in order to demonstrate that understanding any text requires relevant prior knowledge about the content.

The following discussion, thus, consists of three parts. The first part will address some of the theoretical aspects of reading, research conclusions, and the relevance of background knowledge in the act of reading. The second part will present an analysis of a New York Times column in order to highlight the importance of prior knowledge in comprehending the author’s position and purpose in the column. The third part will emphasize some implications for teaching of reading to college students.

### ***Some Theory***

Reading is a dynamic and multifaceted process. A cursory look at the definitions of reading could help us realize the complexity of this process. In the reading research literature, reading has been defined in various words and concepts. Here are a few:

- Reading is the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction among: the reader’s existing knowledge, the information suggested by the text being read and the context of the reading situation (McKeown et al., 1992)
- Reading is the activation of relevant prior knowledge by a cognitively active reader and the combining of the background knowledge with text (Pearson, 1992).
- Reading means bringing meaning to a text in order to get meaning from it (Rosenblatt, 1994).
- Reading, at a higher intellectual level, is reading between the lines (my addition).

Of course, there are other definitions of the process depending on the purpose of the task. But reading research has convinced the experts that comprehension of print is an outcome of an interaction between reader variables such as background knowledge, proficiency level, cognitive ability, motivation and purpose, *and* text variables such as sentence structure, vocabulary intensity, idiomatic, cultural and historical references and the difficulty and novelty of the subject-matter.

In a summary article in the Encyclopedia of Educational Research, P. David Pearson (1992) reviews some of the thinking of the researchers in the field of reading. One idea is that the reader is a builder, an active constructor, and as such heavily depends on prior knowledge to make sense of the page. Another idea is that the understanding of every new text very much depends on the experience the reader has had with all the previous texts; in other words, the more a reader reads, the more thorough will be the comprehension of a new text. Yet another consideration is the difference between a novice reader and an expert reader; an expert reader, Pearson (1992) asserts, has more “world knowledge, linguistic knowledge, text knowledge, and functional knowledge about the social, economic, and political uses of literacy” (p. 1076). This view directly ties in with the schema theory, the notion that there is a structure to one’s knowledge in every domain, and comprehension means attaching new information to its relevant schema. To put it

simply, a reader's knowledge of the world and the way texts are written has a structure similar to a scaffold. When a reader reads something, the content gets processed and subsumed under the cognitive structure that the reader has developed throughout his/her life; this is called meaningful learning. In contrast, when a reader reads something but does not have the relevant scaffolding to attach the new information to, then learning does not happen, and if learning happens, it's temporary and rote (See Ausubel, 1968).

In addition to background knowledge, vocabulary plays a pivotal role in the act of reading and comprehension. Since texts are made up of words, teaching vocabulary becomes an important part of reading comprehension and instruction. Acquisition of vocabulary can be generally achieved either through incidental reading or via direct, deliberate instruction. Reading experts generally agree that both instruction and incidental learning have to be encouraged. In this regard, it is useful to remember that, according to reading research, a college student knows roughly about 60,000 words, but few people learn more than 400 words per year through school lists. This wealth of words is made possible only through extensive reading, and incidental learning. It is common sense, but not practiced enough, that multiple exposures to words is crucial if students are to achieve sophisticated levels of interacting with the printed page.

The overarching purpose of this essay, as mentioned above, is to focus solely on the part that one's background knowledge plays in the act of comprehension of text. To this end, a relatively reference-rich New York Times article will be analyzed in detail and each reference will be annotated with the purpose of demonstrating that for a reader to properly understand the text, its allusions and the nuances of the writer, he/she needs to be familiar with the facts, names and places—along with their connotations—that are mentioned in the text.

With this textual analysis and annotation, I intend to drive home the point that for our students to understand what they read, especially the college level material they deal with, they need to know or at least have an idea about factual, fictional and historical allusions in the reading materials. And if students lack the requisite background knowledge needed to comprehend print and the writer's purpose, it should be the teacher's role to provide the students with advance organizers, i.e., some sort of cognitive scaffolding (Ausubel, 1963) in order to make learning more meaningful and memorable. According to Ausubel (1963, 1968), in teaching new material, the teacher needs to make sure that the students are familiar with the topic and have a general sense of what to expect in the novel text. If students lack this prior knowledge, then efforts must be made to familiarize the students with the content before teaching them the new material. A good example would be trying to understand a work of art; in order to make sense of it all, the audience needs to have a general perception about the sociopolitical atmosphere that gave rise to that work of art.

Here's the newspaper column:

*Saturday, November 11, 2006*

***Drapes of Wrath***

By MAUREEN DOWD

Washington

The new Democratic sweep conjures up an ancient image: Furies swooping down to punish bullies.

Angry winged goddesses with dog heads, serpent hair and blood eyes, unmoved by tears, prayer, sacrifice or nasty campaign ads, avenging offenses by insolent transgressors.

This will be known as the year macho politics failed — mainly because it was macho politics by marshmallow men. Voters were sick of phony swaggering, blustering

and bellicosity, absent competency and accountability. They were ready to trade in the deadbeat Daddy party for the sheltering Mommy party.

All the conservative sneering about a fem-lib from San Francisco who was measuring the drapes for the speaker's office didn't work. Americans wanted new drapes, and an Armani granny with a whip in charge.

A recent study found that the testosterone of American men has been dropping for 20 years, but in Republican Washington, it was running amok, and not in a good way. Men who had refused to go to an untenable war themselves were now refusing to find an end to another untenable war that they had recklessly started.

Republicans were oddly oblivious to the fact that they had turned into a Thomas Nast cartoon: an unappetizing tableau of bloated, corrupt, dissembling, feckless white hacks who were leaving kids unprotected. Tom DeLay and Bob Ney sneaking out of Congress with dollar bills flying out of their pockets. Denny Hastert playing Cardinal Bernard Law, shielding Mark Foley. Rummy, cocky and obtuse as he presided over an imploding Iraq, while failing to give young men and women in the military the armor, support and strategy they needed to come home safely. Dick Cheney, vowing bullheadedly to move "full speed ahead" on Iraq no matter what the voters decided. W. frantically yelling about how Democrats would let the terrorists win, when his lame-brained policies had spawned more terrorists.

After 9/11, Americans had responded to bellicosity, drawn to the image, as old as the Western frontier myth, of the strong father protecting the home from invaders. But this time, many voters, especially women, rejected the rough Rovian scare and divide tactics.

The macho poses and tough talk of the cowboy president were undercut when he seemed flaccid in the face of the vicious Katrina and the vicious Iraq insurgency.

Even former members of the administration conceded they were tired of the muscle-bound style, longing for a more maternal approach to the globe. "We were exporting our anger and our fear, hatred for what had happened," Richard Armitage, the former deputy secretary of state, said in a speech in Australia, referring to the 9/11 attacks. He said America needed "to turn another face to the world and get back to more traditional things, such as the export of hope and opportunity and inspiration."

Talking about hope and opportunity and inspiration has propelled Barack Obama into the presidential arena. His approach seems downright feminine when compared with the Bushies, or even Hillary Clinton. He languidly poses in fashion magazines, shares feelings with Oprah and dishes with the ladies on "The View." After six years of chest-puffing, Senator Obama seems very soothing.

Because of the power of female consumers, some marketing experts predict we will end up a matriarchy. This year, women also flexed their muscle at the polls, transformed into electoral Furies by the administration's stubborn course in Iraq.

On Tuesday, 51 percent of the voters were women, and 55 percent of women voted for the Democratic candidate. It was a revival of the style of Bill Clinton, dubbed our first female president, who knitted together a winning coalition of independents, moderates and suburbanites.

According to The Times's exit polls, women were more likely than men to want some or all of the troops to be withdrawn from Iraq now, and 64 percent of women said that the war in Iraq has not improved U.S. security.

The Senate has a new high of 16 women and the House has a new high of at least 70, with a few races outstanding. Hillary's big win will strengthen her presidential tentacles.

Nancy Pelosi, who will be the first female speaker, softened her voice and look as she cracked the whip on her undisciplined party, taking care not to sound shrill. When she needs to, though, she says she can use her "mother-of-five voice."

At least for the moment, W. isn't blustering and Cheney has lost his tubby swagger. The president is trying to ride the Mommy vibe. He even offered Madame Speaker help with those new drapes.

### ***An Analysis of "Drapes of Wrath"*<sup>1</sup>**

In this section I take a close look at the references of names, places and stories whose meanings and connotations are fundamental to a thorough understanding of the column. Without a fair knowledge of the allusions, the reader will miss the main thrust of the author.

*Drapes of Wrath.* This title is meant to evoke the title of an American Classic novel written by John Steinbeck entitled "Grapes of Wrath," a novel that depicts the horrors of the Great Depression and the struggle of working families for survival, a novel of social protest. The title of the book comes from the song "Battle Hymn of the Republic," written during the Civil War by Julia Ward Howe, and has its origin in "Revelation," the last book of the New Testament.

*Furies.* These were three goddesses of vengeance in Greek mythology (Tisiphone, Megaera and Alecto) whose mission was to relentlessly pursue wrongdoers and punish them; they were horrible to look at because they had snakes for hair and blood dripping from their eyes. (The words furious and infuriate are derived from them.)

*Macho politics.* The word "macho" is often associated with negative character traits among men, particularly Mexican and Latin American men; sometimes it can connote violence and sexism.

*Marshmallow men.* Marshmallow is a light, soft, spongy confection made from mostly sugar; and figuratively it means ineffective. Also, people usually love them when they are roasted.

*A deadbeat daddy.* A deadbeat daddy is one who fails to fulfill his financial obligation to his family; he can meet the obligation but chooses not to.

*A sheltering Mommy.* A mother who shelters and nurtures her family

*A fem-lib from San Francisco.* Nancy Pelosi, who is from San Francisco and is the new Speaker of the House (third in line for U.S. presidency); she is a fashionable woman (buys Armani products) who wants new drapes (curtains) for her office in Washington, D.C.

*Granny with a whip.* A grandmother who is in a leadership position

*Testosterone.* The sex hormone that stimulates development of male sex characteristics and bone muscle growth.

*Untenable war.* In Paragraph 5, the first untenable (indefensible) war is a reference to the Vietnam War, which several of the current top political men leaders did not serve in; and the second untenable war is a reference to the Iraq War, which they started "recklessly."

*Thomas Nast.* A 19th century political caricaturist and cartoonist who fought corruption by drawing bloated, big-belly pictures of politicians who did not care much about the vulnerable members of the society (e.g., children). It was Thomas Nast who popularized the elephant to symbolize the Republican Party, and the donkey as the symbol of the Democratic Party.

In paragraph 6, reference is made to some political leaders (Tom Delay, Bob Ney) who succumbed to corruption by accepting bribes from lobbyists like Abramoff, who was indicted). Also, the author criticizes President Bush, Vice-President Cheney and the now former Defense Secretary Rumsfeld (Rummy) for sending troops to fight with insufficient protective gear.

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<sup>1</sup>The column under discussion and analysis is entitled "Drapes Of Wrath," published in the *New York Times*, written by New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd, dated November 11, 2006.

*The Western frontier myth.* A reference to the false idea that when American were expanding and moving westward in the 17th and 18th centuries, father was the protective figure in the family and would protect his family and house against the invaders.

*Rovian.* A reference to Karl Rove, “the architect” of President George W. Bush’s 2004 election campaign and an influential politician in the Bush Administration.

*Hurricane Katrina.* A vicious hurricane that happened on August 29, 2005 and killed thousands of residents in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama

*Barack Obama.* U.S. senator for Illinois and a fresh presidential hopeful (His famous phrase is: “the audacity of hope.”)

*Oprah.* A TV host who invites guests to talk about various social issues including women’s issues

*The View.* An ABC show hosted by Barbara Walters, Rosie O’Donnell and two other women; a weekly talk show providing female perspective on the day’s headlines

*Matriarchy.* Here, it means a government run by women (compare, patriarchy, a government by men)

*The Times.* The New York Times, a daily newspaper published in New York City

*The Senate.* There are 100 senators in the Senate, part of U.S. Congress (16 of these senators are women, a new achievement for women)

*The House.* The House of Representatives. There are 435 representatives in the House; about 70 of them are women.

*Mother-of-five-voice.* Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the House, has five children and she claims she has a loud voice, when she needs it.

W. President George W. Bush

In addition to the historical and social background, the reader needs to understand the meanings of certain words and idiomatic expressions. Here are some of the words and expressions that might be new to the reader, particularly the ESL reader.

*sweep, conjure up, swoop down, avenge, insolent transgressors, swaggering, blustering, bellicosity, sneer, run amok, untenable, recklessly, oblivious, dissembling, feckless, cocky, obtuse, imploding, armor, vow, bullheadedly, frantically, lame-brained, spawn, invaders, undercut, vicious, flaccid, insurgency, concede, muscle-bound style, longing for, deputy secretary of state, turn another face to the world, propel, arena, downright feminine, languidly, dishes with the ladies (=talking informally), chest puffing, soothing, flexed their muscles, at the polls, stubborn, revival, dubbed, independents, moderates and suburbanites, exit polls, withdraw, outstanding (in this context), presidential tentacles, crack the whip, shrill, blustering, tubby swagger, the Mommy vibe, and a number of others.*

As can be seen from this limited analysis of the column, the writer expects quite a bit from the reader. The writer, a woman, has a very distinct perspective on the American involvement in the world affairs. In a subtle way, she is also gleeful that the new group of political leaders includes some powerful women. By understanding all the nuances of the text and by putting together all the names and places mentioned in the article, the reader is in a much better position to see where the writer of the column stands and what the intent of the article is. To put it differently, *what Maureen Dowd writes here is the tip of the iceberg; what the reader needs to bring to the text to achieve a thorough understanding of the issues is the rest of the iceberg.*

### ***Teaching Implications***

The above brief review of research in reading comprehension and its interrelatedness to the reader's background knowledge along with the evidence presented in the analysis of the New York Times column lead us to a host of common sense conclusions (in no particular order of importance).

- a. Reading is an interaction between the words on the page and the knowledge in the reader's head; thus, without background knowledge the reader cannot make connections and achieve comprehension.
- b. Activating prior knowledge helps students to process the unfamiliar text more productively (Carr & Thompson, 1996). Of course, the prior knowledge has to be relevant to the content of the reading passage.
- c. Direct instruction of background knowledge through advance organizers becomes necessary in many cases (Ausubel, 1963).
- d. Activating background knowledge through reflection and oral elaboration during text reading is a more effective strategy than taking notes on main ideas and their corresponding details (Spires & Donley, 1998)
- e. Teachers can facilitate student activation of background knowledge by having them answer questions before and/or while they read new material. Purpose questions may be helpful cues for activating background knowledge (Rowe & Rayford, 1987).
- f. Teachers can assign different students different research topics that are related to the reading material in preparation for the reading of the new text. For example, with regard to the newspaper column analyzed above, each student can look into a different reference or historical allusion and then share it with the class. This will be an optimal learning experience and rehearsal for BMCC students, who need to pass the CPE exam, which requires searching, inferencing and making connections.
- g. The age-old Wh-questions (Who, Where, When, Why, What, etc.) are effective in both activating the student background knowledge as well as in contextualizing the reading passage under discussion.
- h. Students in remedial reading and writing courses need multiple exposures to meaningful content and text in order to develop background knowledge and language; teaching linguistic forms is not sufficient.
- i. Without background knowledge, the reader might get attached to the text in a most superficial way, without much ability to generalize and incorporate the message.
- j. Yes, the reader brings meaning to the text, but the meaning has to be relevant to the text's blueprint.
- k. The more texts the students read, the less they have to depend on the text at hand for comprehension (Stromso & Braten, 2002).
- l. Ironically, teaching reading less may help students learn to read more.
- m. Having students write reading journals in response to texts and asking them to summarize what they have read (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1978; Pearson & Fielding, 1991) instead of asking them to do isolated skills tasks leads to more profound understanding of the reading material.
- n. Theory dictates practice; given this, the more informed the teacher is with regard to reading and writing theories, the more effective his/her teaching techniques will be.

## **Conclusion**

In teaching reading, there is a phenomenon called the Matthew Effect (Note: the reader of this piece is encouraged to look up the phrase and see where it originated from!). It means the wider the background knowledge of the student is, the easier it is for him/her to process print. Reading is neither a bottom-up (text to reader) nor a top-down (reader to text) process; it's a transactional process that goes in both directions (Rosenblatt, 1994). Therefore, to foster enthusiasm for reading and to help students bridge the knowledge gap, we, as teachers, should coach our students to look at the printed page in a meaningful way. Teaching isolated reading skills will not get our students far enough; we need to help them understand what it takes to comprehend a text.. Since good reading and comprehension are the foundation of academic success, more than anything else, our students at BMCC need to do enough reading to know how texts are constructed and how background knowledge can be brought to bear on the act of reading. It is worth reiterating that teaching of reading should not replace students' reading to learn.

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# Writing, Literature, and Material Culture: Global Things

Page Dougherty Delano  
*English Department*

“No ideas but in things.” So urges William Carlos Williams for the writing of poetry, although his poems certainly contain wonderful abstractions and queries about the human experience. I want to use this phrase, “no ideas but in things,” as a red thread through this essay about teaching about things in writing and literature classes. I will offer some brief comments about the role of things in developmental and composition courses (Eng 095, *Writing I and II*), and then I will turn to reading and writing about things in an upper level literature class (Eng 392, *World Literature: 1700 - the present*), where things take on a much more global context, linking new and old worlds, binding together societies that are modernizing and those that are accessed to fuel that modernization. In both my writing and literature classes, I want students to understand that writing is very much influenced by things. Our ability to write about, and to read things clearly is very important, whether it be a brief objective description or a longer literary exploration of profound matters in which *things* may play a part. Furthermore, I emphasize that good close reading and literary analysis are dependent on understanding evidence, which often comes in the form of things.

In developmental/intensive writing classes I devote a few early weeks to objective description, where students have to *describe* a scene. Oddly enough, this exercise is quite difficult, for students have often not yet grasped the importance of locating objects within some logical—and spatial and temporal—frame, for example from outer to inner, in ascending or descending order, from what is most striking to what is least striking, or by order of importance or incidence. They often shy away from specificity, noting “my neighborhood” and “my street” rather than Canarsie and Ralph Avenue. This task of scene description, with lively exercises in specificity that generate further writing assignments, provides an opportunity to talk about such things as the richness of language, the beauty of place names, and the importance of specific words over general words in convincing the reader, or in Nietzsche’s phrase, “to seduce the reader” through the power of words. Descriptive writing alone will not solve a student’s confusion over the variations of, for instance, “to marry,” what is reflexive, intransitive or what takes a direct object and so on. But I think this attention to detail, to specificity, to words themselves with their very real referents is part of the process of empowering students, of letting them trust their own perceptions and grapple with the tricky processes of observation, arrangement and order.

I have found that just looking out the window (when I have a window) onto Tribeca, my students and I see different things. We can even imagine a student saying, “I see nothing.” I see roof gardens, I see the contrast of high and low buildings, apartment renovations that are—not visibly of course—worth millions of dollars, and variants of light and dark. I don’t think many of my students have trained their eye to see, and from this to analyze. They see generalities; perhaps they see something that does not include them in its day-to-dayness—for they pass through the streets below and head home, and they for the most part have little engagement with this scene, with the layers of stuff and, beneath that, the layers of meaning that unfurl outside the window.

I don’t mean to be rigid. There’s an intense, curious liveliness on Chambers Street every day as students pass and look in the windows of Subway or Pizza Lola, decide

what to eat, stop to flirt with someone, stare into the military recruiting station, always thinking a hundred thoughts. Looking at sneakers, or CD covers, I know they see, and read into them, far more than I. But I think the ability to see—to look into—scenes that don't seem so familiar, that are beyond their comfort zone, is something we want to be aiding our students to do, as well as to help develop a more effective vocabulary for describing what is already familiar. "Good writing and good arguments are explorations and expressions of thought," writes Allyson Polsky (2003, p. 427) in her assessment of having students engage with evidence in writing and rhetoric classes at Yale. I think my approach here parallels her work in having students engage in "a process of discovery, not merely of mastery."

In my Introduction to Literature class (Writing II, ENG 201), I spend two or three sessions on Susan Glaspell's story "A Jury of Her Peers," written in 1921 (and also adapted as the play "*Trifles*"). We go over the importance of evidence. Mrs. Minnie Wright, who never appears in the play or story, and who lived in a dreary bleak cold and lonely home with her husband in the rural expanse of sparsely populated farmland, is being held for the murder of her husband. The women who arrive at her farmhouse with their husbands (one who is "married to the law") have come to gather clothes for Mrs. Wright. They stumble upon seemingly trivial objects, trivial in men's eyes, which indicate that indeed Mrs. Wright may have had a motive to kill her husband. They find quilt pieces stitched in a frenzied fashion, a bird cage with a broken latch, and then a canary song-bird with its neck wrung. The two women begin to piece together an understanding that Mrs. Wright was being metaphorically strangled by her husband, and must have snapped. Ultimately, they are silent about the evidence they have encountered. Thus, an exciting discussion ensues about the importance of *things* in literary texts, and of citing evidence in literary analysis, of ways of reading, and a direction for writing.

My interest in this issue of seeing blossomed when I began to think about preparing a Distance Learning course on modern world literature (Eng 392, 1700 to the present). I had used Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* in a face to face class, to look at the *real* world—a world undergoing such radical transformation in Europe and the Caribbean, a world which literature arises from or reacts to. However, when Mintz's book proved to be too dense, in later classes I turned to shorter articles, and the web's offerings. In addition to access to full texts through Bartleby.com for example, extensive historical and cultural resources are available, especially when it comes to the early 19th century, the age of reason, of discovery, of colonial expansion. Numerous sources explore the connection between England and the slave trade, for example, and detail the age of exploration and colonialism with maps, time lines, and good visual connections.

I wanted my students to step aside from 18th century literary texts to consider the importance, at times the shocking importance, of commodities. Of course essential in exploring this role of commodities is the awareness that human beings themselves were fundamental, significant commodities in this period, a tragic fact hardly lost on our students. In a module which I entitled Travel and Discovery, I aimed to put this barbaric practice—the commodification of human beings—in the context of the incredible changes in European culture that were going on at the time, and to give more shape to one of the passages that informs my course, Walter Benjamin's view that "the history of civilization is the history of barbarism."

So, in reshaping this module on material culture, I opted for a short article about the dissemination of chocolate from Mexico to Europe, and a long article with three distinct sections about three important food products—sugar, corn, and the potato—that were indigenous to the Americas, all of which found their way to Europe by various means and for various purposes to Europe, with dramatic consequences. The consequences for the Americas were of course also great, and central to this drama perhaps was the role

of sugar, which effected the near-extinction of the native peoples of the Caribbean, substantially increased the importation of Africans who were forced into slavery, and in still other ways transformed and entrenched the brutal culture of plantation life.

I required students to become especially familiar with one of the sections of the longer essay, either sugar, corn, or the potato. For the first two semesters in which I taught this module, I supplemented these readings with excerpts from 17th century travel/ conquest narratives by Sir Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh. This past semester I made these supplemental, using instead an *Encyclopedia Britannica* website that discusses European exploration and conquest in detail.

What is exciting about this project is that we all learned so much about the thing called food, about its production and consumption any myriad meanings. The module's Lecture on Blackboard notes Jonathan Swift's claim in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) that to serve an English woman's breakfast, "this whole Globe ... must be at least three times gone around," and that Alexander Pope, in "The Rape of the Lock" (1723) depicts a lady's tea service filled with teas, spices, and coffees that have come from international trade. Thus I make a connection to texts we are to read in the following Module. Many of the students have read *Fast Food Nation*, or have seen *Super Size Me*; many are interested in healthy foods, and others are trying to maintain their own culture's diets and practices, so there is already a ground of interest. Furthermore, a solid contingent of students comes from the Caribbean and the Americas, and so possess a more specific knowledge of these issues, which adds both emotional and historical cast to our discussions.

While I certainly try to sharpen the understanding of the role of commodities in modern Europe, my lecture aims to give more texture to the scientific revolution, and the very real questions about the makeup of the world. Students might see more clearly that these commodities complemented the interests of Europe's expanding reading public in a rapidly changing world, as people doted on travel narratives, scientific treatises, texts proscribing social decorum and religious piety, as well as gossip and gritty narratives and that relatively new phenomenon, the novel—which we turn to after Pope and Swift.

The module on travel and discovery is interdisciplinary: it shows a connection between "literature" and what seems to be "high culture" in every day life, including the shifting realities of 18th century living, with its newly created tastes—which exist at first among the upper classes but will spread down into the middle and even working classes as the century develops. The module links, as I suggest above, interests in the material world, curious and innocent, or nefarious and damning, with cultural practices.

By the time we get to Jane Austen, we see a world which seems intact with all its country houses and tea times and nearly invisible servants who are so loving and attentive when visible. I want my students to see that there is an underlying material culture of work and an exchange of commodities that supports this world. Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) articulates this culture and its shifting class relations—and it will give way to those for whom philosophy becomes materialism, and science becomes the study of radical transformation or the inner workings of the mind in Marx, Darwin, and Freud.

Of course "things" is a complicated idea. Hamlet announces after he meets the traveling players, "Ah, the play's the thing/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king." We see here a different brand of thing. In referring to the play as a mousetrap, Hamlet has created a metaphor—where a very process, an act, is turned into a "thing." Thus we see in some instances, to make ideas more understandable, or lively, they need to be likened to things. Undoubtedly, in modern parlance, we shift comfortably between using thing as an object, and as a process. In "do the right thing," for example, we refer to an act. The final tweaking I propose here may speak to a post-modern indeterminacy of language, but more notably it means that the students themselves have to continually

work on their own designations for language, of shifting and contradictory significations, and to work at the very meaning of meaning. This is a moment of meta-education here, part of the process of making students active learners. They can develop their tools of investigation and inquiry, their abilities to address contradictory evidence, and to read the interconnections of global cultures, as they develop, as Allyson Polsky puts it, a “greater investment in scholarship and self-expression.” And that’s just the sort of *thing* we’re after in the classroom.

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# Do You Tell Your Students Stories?

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Stories have a habit of stealing themselves into my classroom. I started using stories in my classes not because of an intended educational benefit, but because they flowed naturally. I have had the experience of putting into practice almost every major concept that I teach and there is at least one story associated with each. This is because I worked for several years as an industrial research chemist where I applied organic chemistry to make new products. Whilst teaching, I can usually recall many details of instances where I had applied a concept. These details include relative quantities of reacting chemicals, smell, color, specific reaction conditions, hazards, safety precautions, side reactions and any unexpected happenings (including drama). It is fortuitous, as such details are not trivia but are expressions of the inherent nature of the particular chemical species and the concepts that have evolved to describe their behavior. This is what we expect students to be able to predict based on the intrinsic nature of the chemical world as envisaged by current chemical theories. I have noticed that students do enjoy these stories and often have many questions pertaining to the associated chemical concepts. I usually use the stories to reinforce the relevant concepts. However, am I making good use of class time by telling stories, and is this good a educational practice?

Stories, cautionary tales and parables are, in a sense, case studies. They have been used for centuries to provide educational messages. They have transcended cultural and geographic divisions and have withstood the test of time. We all attest to their effectiveness as they are what we still use to teach our children at the very early stages of their lives. Case studies are also commonly used to teach law, business, and medicine. However, the use of case studies in undergraduate science courses is somewhat new but it is gaining popularity (see references). I sought from the literature cases studies that I could use in my organic chemistry classes. I felt that a more formal approach to incorporating stories into the lectures would likely be more efficient and would lend itself to formal assessment of their effectiveness. I did not find any that I could use in my organic chemistry class without substantial modification, so I sought to develop a series of my own case studies.

What makes a good case study for use in the classroom? Herreid suggests that a good case study (a) tells a story, (b) focuses on an interest-arousing issue, (c) is set in the past five years, (d) creates empathy in the central characters, (e) includes quotations, (f) is relevant to the reader, (g) must have pedagogic utility, (h) is conflict provoking, (i) is decision forcing, (j) has generality, and (k) is short. With due consideration to these characteristics, I developed a series of 12 case studies for use in Organic Chemistry I and II. The experience was a challenging and an educational one.

A major goal of undergraduate organic chemistry is to train students so that they can write mechanisms for reactions using curved arrows to indicate flow of electrons. It is quite a challenge to motivate students to embrace this task. Students very often query the need to develop such skills, especially since the majority of them are intent on pursuing further studies in the biological sciences and not the chemical sciences. Their reaction is not surprising as the textbook does not make a clear connection between a knowledge of organic reaction mechanisms and the understanding of biological systems. One of the case studies that I developed, entitled "Why does Tylenol cause liver damage?", does this. Students are very interested in this case as it seeks to answer a question that is already on their minds; the liver toxicity of Tylenol was headline news in the summer of

2006. The case outlines the three possible reaction schemes that would explain the liver toxicity for Acetaminophen. The case also presents the available evidence to support the likely reaction scheme and mechanism. When the case was done in class, students were required to work in groups, examine each bit of evidence, and form an opinion as to the most likely reaction scheme and a possible mechanism. Each group was required to identify collectively the correct reaction scheme and propose a mechanism, based on the evidence presented. As the correct reaction scheme was not obvious but required careful analytical thought and chemical insight, each of the three possible schemes was chosen by at least one group.

This was a valuable exercise from a pedagogical perspective for a number of reasons. It provided the class with a thorough practice in writing various types of organic reaction mechanism and in reaching an evidence-based conclusion. As the case study was given to students before class, many of them spent time looking in the literature for the correct solution. This became obvious in the class discussion as they ignored the evidence presented in the case and presented information from the literature that seemed to be related to the case but did not shed light on the correct pathway and likely mechanism. These students invariably chose one of the incorrect pathways. This was also a valuable lesson to the class as it taught students that the scientific process requires analytical thinking and not regurgitation of collected facts. An anonymous survey of the class indicated that students thoroughly enjoyed the exercise and felt that it enhanced their understanding of organic reaction mechanisms. In addition, students were given a quiz on organic reaction mechanisms before the case study and one after the case study. The class average for quiz A was 29% while that for quiz B was 84%. Quizzes A and B were different but of the same level of difficulty. They had been administered to previous classes and average class scores were about the same for both. This may indicate that the pedagogical intention of the exercise was realized.

Another case study that was developed was entitled, "Medication induced blood discoloration in an HIV patient." This story describes a scenario in which a combination of medication used to prevent fungal infection in an HIV patient led to blood discoloration. Students were asked to work through the chemical concepts pertaining to the mode of action and metabolism of the medications. This case was effective in reviewing functional group chemistry. In addition, it resonated well with students and brought home the point that although science has transformed HIV from a lethal to a chronic disease; it is an incurable disease with many complications.

The other stories developed also had many of the qualities of a good case study as previously described. A reading of their titles gives some indication of their likely appeal to students.

1. Help millions and make millions in the process.
2. A killer stalks the nation; what are you going to do about it?
3. Why do we need Vitamin B1?
4. Petroleum reserves are being depleted; how will we make plastics?
5. For drugs, shape, size and charge do matter.
6. A drug made for a father.
7. French Fries: Much more than calories to worry about.
8. Are these crushed leaves or are they something more sinister?
9. A medication gone bad.
10. Is there more to curry than the taste?

I have not transformed the class into one where case studies are the primary mode of instruction. However, I use the case studies judiciously to supplement and enrich the lectures at suitable intervals. I am careful not to use more than two case studies per class per semester. Nevertheless, I make all of the case studies available to every student registered in Organic Chemistry I and II by posting them on Blackboard. I am encouraged by the fact that many students attempt these case studies on their own and often come to me to discuss their solutions. Developing these case studies has also been valuable to me. Since, for instance, I followed the advice that a good case study has to pertain to recent and relevant happenings, it has helped me to keep up with new developments in organic chemistry and its application to healthcare. In addition, developing and moderating the use of the case studies helped me make additional connections with my students. This is most important as it is often what allows me to motivate and inspire students to persist and succeed in as challenging a subject as organic chemistry.

### **Acknowledgements**

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# Comma Comma Comma Quote; Or, Write On

A rappoem

Jack Estes

*Social Science*

Yo my name is Jack, I like my licorice black,  
and I'm gonna teach you Mama or I'll eat my cat.  
Now Mr. Carpenter, what are ya harpin' fer?  
All's you really got to do is start to write out flat.

You take your Strunk and White, and don't you get uptight.  
You write a letter till you're better then you write all night.  
You write like this: Ya go  
    Pop rap boom boom comma comma quote.

I said  
    Pop-pop rap-rap boom-boom, comma-comma-comma-comma quote.  
Uh-huh.

So take a Raymond Carver and a John-George-Paul;  
add a Ringo, dingo, wrap them in a ball.  
Now you listen to me, Barb, don't you hide behind that garb:  
Put your pencil in your pinky (even though it's kind of kinky)  
and write  
    Pop rap boom comma comma quote.

Yeah  
    Pop-pop rap-rap boom-boom, comma-comma-comma-comma quote.

Now buy a lottery ticket and go out and picket.  
Add a hot dog – boom boom – and a sticky wicket.  
Plus a German name of Herman  
    Comma comma comma quote.  
Listen to me – boom – yeah.

Michelle, my belle, ring a ding-dong dell.  
If we really dig the nonsense we can duly dig the tuppence.  
We can dig it, we can dig it, we can dig-dog-dote.  
I said write it, don't you fight it –  
    Comma comma comma quote.  
Uh-huh.

So can you write now? Do you know how? Write a poem? Essay? Song?  
Are you nervous? Are you nutso? 'fraid you'll do it wrong?  
You won't.

Just listen to me –  
    Boom rap comma comma quote.  
Comma comma Sergeant Estes says get out and stroke.  
You know you really got to write to start a'rockin' that boat.  
Yeah. That's good.  
    Boom rap comma comma comma pop.

It's a mondo flap. Now don't you ever stop.  
No. Don't stop.  
Uh-huh.

**And now: The Commentary:**

In 1984, I stood in front of my class while my students wrote an exam. One student, Celina, had an earphone connected to a Walkman. (Pre-ipod, obviously.) So I walked over to her desk and quietly asked her, "Okay, Celina, what are you listening to?"

"Run DMC," she whispered. "Ever hear of 'em?"

I had to confess that I hadn't. "Here," she said, "Check 'em out."

So I did. And I was agog. What was this thing called "rap." And if students were listening to it, could I use it in my classes? So I went home and wrote myself a rap, a rap about writing. A rap about *free-writing*.

I believe in the freewrite. I believe strongly that it allows one's non-critical side to surface, and it's that non-critical side which allows our writing to live, allows our imaginations to emerge. Criticism kills thoughts, especially when the criticism comes from our own minds, our own backgrounds, especially when the criticism comes before one begins to write. That's the kind of criticism which my friend called "Grampa's damning finger," that finger-wagging which reminds us that we're not doing what we're supposed to do, not *behaving*.

But good behavior, while it may be related tangentially to the final written product, truly has nothing to do with first drafts. First drafts must be written freely, without a mental censor, without a subconscious – or conscious – voice telling us we're doing it wrong. One poet calls it "releasing his madman." Freud considers it the expression of the Id. We'll have plenty of time later to allow Grampa, the critic, the Superego, to comment.

Ever experienced "writer's block"? It can strike anyone who's trying to write anything, I believe. But writer's block is caused by The Critic, by Grampa's (or teacher's) damning finger. Poet William Stafford had a cure for writer's block, and I believe in it too: "Lower your standards and keep on writing." It's the "standards" which come from outside, from critics, from our Superego.

So this poem is an expression of the joy of writing, the discovery of how writing can take a young woman beyond what she *thinks* she knows and into that magical area – really, this is magical – of uncovering new ideas and thoughts. It's happened to you: You didn't know what you knew until you started writing about it. That's when you discovered not only what you knew but also what you didn't know. You discovered where the holes are in your thinking.

My favorite line in the poem is, "You write a letter till you're better; then you write all night." That works for me since it expresses how we sometimes need to resort to atypical writing in order to connect. We can suggest to students that they write a letter rather than a "normal" paper, at least until they have made the connection, until they have found what it is they want to say. Then they simply won't want to stop writing. It leads to a joy of expression.

I read this poem to my sociology classes. (In fact, I have acted it out and recorded it on a DVD, and I play it for them, complete with a musical accompaniment.) I'm usually a bit embarrassed to play it, sort of nervous. It is intended to break the ice, to let students see me as being relaxed enough to make a fool of myself. Part of writing is being willing to make a fool of oneself. It gets back to that madman I mentioned earlier, that side of us which actually does want to be released. We will have plenty of time to arrange and develop and polish and correct and rewrite and revise later, after we have some words on the page. But it's getting the words on the page that matters.

The poem is also intended to serve a clear pedagogical purpose: Here's how to do a freewrite. The punctuation repetition – "comma comma comma quote" – is really a way of saying that the punctuation doesn't actually matter one whit during this process. And it is a process. The freewrite is a first step in moving toward a finished draft, in having an organized expression of thoughts and feelings.

Do you write good drafts the first time? Well, maybe. Sometimes. But I very seldom do; I suspect it rarely happens to you, too. Mostly I need to work and work and work. But first, I need to have something to work *on*. I need words on the page.

Yes, I believe in the freewrite. Uh-huh.

# A Japanese-Style Pre-Professional Development Experience

J. Gastón, A. Han and V. Lee  
*Mathematics*

March 25, 2006 was a routinely busy Saturday at BMCC. There were many classes in progress, filled with diverse groups of weekend students. At noon, four classes of prospective teachers convened to hear a special guest speaker, Dr. Mokoto Yoshida, renowned for his research and development of a pedagogical tool known as *Lesson Study*. This method, begun in Japan as *jogyokenkyu*, is currently the primary method of professional development for Japanese teachers. Dr. Yoshida began promoting *lesson study* in the United States when he was a doctoral student at the University of Chicago. Boosted by the trend toward student-centered instruction and the critical need for better quality mathematics and science instruction, the Lesson Study movement has steadily gained momentum. There is a local Lesson Study Research Group at Columbia University.

At the beginning of the presentation, Dr. Yoshida surveyed the group of curious prospective teachers. He asked his audience if they knew how to find the area of a triangle. After a “yes” chorus and with some heads still nodding affirmatively, the prospective educators were asked how they might teach the geometry lesson to young children. The room slowly warmed up with reticent ideas brewing. As Dr. Yoshida showed a videoclip of *lesson study* in action at Public School #2 in Paterson, New Jersey, the prospective teachers began to suspect that the answer to his question might not be a simple one. He explained the basic *lesson study* cycle: (1) a group of classroom teachers thoroughly research and plan a lesson together, (2) one teacher in the group implements the lesson as the others observe it, (3) the teachers reflect, discuss and record their findings, then (4) edit and revise the lesson as necessary and sometimes implement it again. The video-clip clearly illustrated lesson study. Educators were quietly walking around a regular class of children learning to find the area of a triangle. They observed the children work, use manipulatives, and engage in mathematical dialogue. Although some of them seemed to be writing even more than the classroom students, the observers were not permitted to interrupt or ask questions.

Dr. Yoshida noted that *lesson study* enabled groups of teachers to collaborate in writing lessons, to engage in research in developing the lessons, and to have access to the excellent lessons they have authored. In Japan, teachers engage in such research and publish more than other educational researchers. The complete impact of successful teacher-led professional development came with a slide showing a room full of bound books of lessons stacked from the floor to the ceiling. Outstanding Japanese mathematics textbooks, and teacher guides that include personal comments and samples of student work, are the products of *lesson study* research by truly dedicated teacher authors.

Dr. Yoshida discussed typical issues involving school goals and daily lessons so that his audience of prospective teachers would further appreciate the need for *lesson study*. A school goal might specify creating a community of responsible student learners, but teachers would have no idea how to achieve it. Dr. Yoshida asked leading questions that teachers of any level might ponder: “What kind of students do we have?” “What kind of students do we want to have?” “What can we do to promote student improvement?” At the elementary level, the questions are further complicated by a mathematical focus on different areas for various levels, for example, lower grade multiplication of whole numbers, middle grade division of whole numbers, and upper grade operations with rational

numbers. It was clear that in order to initiate *lesson study* methods, communication between teachers had to begin on common ground.

Dr. Yoshida explained that the *lesson study* project at the Paterson school began in 1999 with a focus on problem solving, student engagement, student note-taking skills, teacher blackboard organization, and general ways to maximize student learning. In successive years, mathematics and other subjects were targeted so a variety of more lesson study materials are available in the United States. Anticipating that question, Dr. Yoshida commented that some lessons are now available online where every teacher—and future teacher—has access to them: <http://www.tc.edu/lessonstudy/lessonstudy.html>.

During the second part of his talk, Dr. Yoshida presented a third-grade mathematics lesson that was initially familiar, but progressed to mesmerize his audience. He showed cards containing familiar arrays of dots that are used to develop and test children's number pattern recognition. He challenged students by very quickly flicking each of several cards up and asking the number of dots. As the patterns grew more complicated, the prospective teachers grew more serious and attentive. At one point, Dr. Yoshida observed that they were sitting on the edge of their seats and their eyes were wide with anticipation. The prospective teachers began to understand a need for strategies that involved more than simple pattern recognition or a very quick count. With a handout showing many arrays of dots, Dr. Yoshida presented a final challenge for students to use one or two given operations in number sentences (equations) calculate the total number of dots in each array. Fascinated by the non-traditional problem-solving approach, the prospective teachers enthusiastically tackled the task. As they compared their solutions with one another, they were surprised at the wide variety of answers. Dr. Yoshida copied several solutions on the whiteboard so that he could discuss similarities and differences. He closed with an important connection between the equations and mathematical formulas involving exponentiation and symbols of grouping commonly found in secondary-level and college-level mathematics.

Dr. Yoshida's summation highlighted the importance of good lessons providing good elementary foundations for higher levels of mathematics. However there was little time remaining to answer the very last questions about the use of *lesson study* in other subject areas such as science, social studies and ESL. As Dr. Yoshida ended his presentation, he received a very warm applause with several requests for his e-mail address.

On this otherwise ordinary Saturday at BMCC, a group of future educators were captivated by the extraordinary potential of *lesson study*.

# Critical Reading in the Statistics Classroom

Annette F. Gourgey  
*Mathematics*

## **Why Read in Statistics?**

MAT150, Introductory Statistics, is an interdisciplinary course requiring application of mathematical skills to real-world situations. Most BMCC students take it to fulfill their liberal arts mathematics requirement; many are advised to take it because applied statistics is used in many fields. Even if students will not conduct research, they may read articles, or hear news reports that use statistics to summarize trends and draw conclusions. Thus, to learn statistics effectively, students have to master both mathematics and reading of technical material. Students also need these skills to pass the CUNY Proficiency Exam, the gatekeeper to junior-year status.

A fair percentage of BMCC students, like most under-prepared college students, often have poor reading skills. They tend to be passive, lose concentration, miss important points, and to write brief and inadequate responses to questions, showing poor comprehension. This compounds their difficulties with BMCC's Introductory Statistics course, for which reading proficiency is not a prerequisite.

Reading about statistics is worthwhile for other reasons. As a statistical research consultant, I want my students to see that statistics is more than formulas for the mathematics classroom. Statistical methods are used widely; they deepen understanding of social trends, and it is just more fun to learn them in their real-world contexts. Moreover, statistics education reform emphasizes teaching not only mathematics but *statistical thinking*, the reasoning and decision-making professionals use in the context of real-world problems (Chance, 2002).

For examples of statistics in real life that students can relate to, I use articles from the popular press rather than from scholarly journals. However, even these short, conversational pieces often mystify them. Reading these articles is more difficult than it might appear, since the reader must be familiar with the statistical concept, must recognize it in a new form, and must understand it well enough to follow its logic in the application. Even when I provided study questions and highlighted important passages, students failed to show good understanding. When I had students discuss the articles in small collaborative learning groups, they still did not understand them, because if students don't know what to look for, they would not know how to help each other find it. Clearly, if I wanted my students to understand statistical articles, I had to teach them how to read in statistics as directly as I taught them how to calculate in it.

## **Metacognitive Reading**

In my training as a cognitive psychologist, I became aware of the importance of *metacognition*, or awareness and control of one's learning (Baker & Brown, 1984). Metacognitive skills involve identifying learning goals, planning strategies to reach them, monitoring progress, and clarifying misunderstanding. Metacognitive skills are the "executive functions" that guide the thinking processes that underlie reading, problem solving, and other intellectual tasks; they enable students to become active, self-directed learners (Hartman & Sternberg, 1993). Students with poor metacognitive skills tend to be passive learners who do not define clear learning goals for themselves and do not know whether they have correctly understood or performed the tasks.

Many studies demonstrate the effectiveness of teaching students metacognitive strategies to monitor their reading comprehension, to use teachers' questions to guide their

reading, to generate and answer their own questions, and to summarize main points. Teaching metacognitive strategies is not a substitute for the benefits of extensive reading experience to build vocabulary and background knowledge. However, metacognitive skills can *enhance* this experience, by helping students to direct their reading to identify what is important, to detect and clarify confusion, and to make connections to relevant background knowledge. Moreover, research shows that a few sessions of reading strategy training are as effective as many—much like learning to check one’s mathematical work, they are simple to learn but need to become habitual (Willingham, 2006/07).

A highly successful method for teaching metacognitive reading skills is Palincsar and Brown’s reciprocal teaching (Hartman, 1994; Palincsar & Brown, 1984). This method involves teaching the metacognitive skills of prediction, question generation, comprehension monitoring, clarification of confusion, and summarizing important ideas. In the original method, a teacher models the skills for one paragraph, then students take turns modeling these skills for each succeeding paragraph in a round-robin format in a small learning group.

Since I was concerned that college students would find this procedure, designed for elementary students, tedious and time-consuming, I modified it by eliminating the round-robin format and substituted it with a full-class discussion. Previously, I had success using this modification in collaborative learning of general college reading (Gourgey, 1999). For my statistics class, I modified the method further for reading articles requiring technical knowledge by including a step asking students to review their relevant background knowledge prior to reading.

In the next section, I describe the technical article used and how I helped the students to apply the reading strategies to improve their comprehension of it.

### ***The Classroom Experiment***

I have traditionally had students read an op-ed column called “The Myth of the Volatile Voter,” about the reasons for variation in pre-election polls (Plissner, 2000). The article, published just a week before the contested US 2000 presidential election, begins with examples of widely varying polls predicting the winner alternately as Bush or Gore. The author notes, tongue-in-cheek, that the varying results are often attributed to “this year’s reigning suspect as the source of all volatility ... flighty independent women.” He goes on, “But, much more to the point, there is sampling error,” and explains that the true culprit is variation in random samples, summarized in a footnote to each poll as the “margin of error.” Then he explains how the margin of error affects poll results more than people realize, and concludes with a warning that in such a close election, pollsters can easily call the wrong winner (a warning that went sadly unheeded just days later). The article includes a large-print embedded statement, “The key to gyrating numbers is in the pollsters’ fine print.” I added to the copy my own handwritten underlines and asterisks for the most important passages.

Preparation for reading this article consists of lessons on random sampling and the margin of error, plus homework problems involving both calculation and interpretation. I also give students a handout of four study questions to guide their reading. These questions were as follows:

#### *Questions about “The Myth of the Volatile Voter”*

1. What is the reason that the results of polls swing so wildly?
2. In a typical poll, how much of a difference between the candidates would we have to see before we could say that one of them was leading?

3. Why does the sampling error get larger when the sample is broken down (e.g. males vs. females)?
4. Why does the author say “the closer the election, the greater the risk” of an incorrect prediction from a poll?

Even though the first three questions are stated explicitly in the text, most students have difficulty answering them. Frequently, they identify the source of the variation in polls as independent women who change their minds rather than as sampling error, missing the author’s humor, not to mention the statistical point of the article. They often answer the second and third questions incorrectly, even though the numbers and reasons are stated. And the last question, which requires them to make an inference based on topic knowledge, stumps almost everyone. As Willingham (2006/07) pointed out, even if students can lift answers out of the text based on words and syntax, they must relate their reading to organized background knowledge to insure deep understanding. For the students struggling with difficult new material as well as with poor reading skills, this is a formidable task.

Given our lengthy syllabus, I could spare only two sessions on reading strategies—fewer than the four I had used for general reading (Gourgey, 1999), but as the research suggested, perhaps even a few could make a difference. Since the class was small (24 students), and I felt my students needed more direction than they would get in small groups, I used full-class discussion. On the previous day, I gave students the article with a handout to prepare them for technical reading (a shortened version is shown below). I told them that the class would discuss how to analyze the article because many students had a hard time identifying what’s important. Further, these tips would be useful for other technical college reading.

### ***Suggestions for Reading Statistical Articles***

1. *Activate your prior knowledge.* Think about what you already know about this topic; keep this information in mind as you read.
2. *Create a first impression.* Read the title and any headings or quotes in the article. Quickly look over the article and at any diagrams or illustrations.
3. *List your questions.* List questions about things that seem confusing or that you’d like to know more about.
4. *Make predictions.* List predictions of what you think the article will be about.
5. *Read the article.* Keep your predictions and questions in mind as you read and look for how they turn out. If any idea is confusing, mark the spot and note what you do to try to get back on track.
6. *Review your questions.* After you have finished reading the article, ask yourself these questions: Were my questions answered? Is anything still unclear? How can I clarify it?
7. *Answer the study questions.* Write as though for a friend who needs help understanding the article. Are you satisfied that you understand and can explain it well? If not, what can you do to improve?

### ***Class Discussions using Critical Reading Strategies***

*Critical Reading Strategy One: Activate Prior Knowledge.* I began the first session by asking: “How many students answered the reading comprehension questions by first reading the questions and then scanning the passage for keywords, rather than by reading the passage through?” Half of the students raised their hands. I said that strategy would

work if the questions come straight from the passage, but it would not work if the questions require synthesizing the information. This exercise would help them learn how to do that. For the first step, Activate Prior Knowledge, students were told to list the topics they thought were relevant. They listed: margin of error; gap or overlap of percentages for candidates and what these meant; sample size; and sampling distribution. For all steps, I did not make suggestions, but merely prompted students with “What else?” until they ran out of ideas. I was satisfied that they had identified the important topics.

*Critical Reading Strategy Two: Create a First Impression.* Next, I gave students one minute to scan the article and asked what caught their eye. Their responses included: “the large print sentence in the middle,” “the title,” “the Bush-Gore race,” “independent women,” and “Gallup.” I listed the responses on the board without making any judgment about their relevance.

*Critical Reading Strategies Three and Four: List Questions and Make Predictions.* Here students were told to generate questions and make predictions about the content. According to research, students are more likely to develop self-direction if they generate their own questions and make predictions than if they rely solely on teachers’ (Hartman, 1994; Palincsar & Brown, 1984). My students found it easy to generate questions. They completed these two steps somewhat interactively. They generated the following two lists:

#### *Questions*

- Why is it a myth?
- Why are independent women so important?
- What does “volatile” mean?
- What is a “volatile voter?”
- Why should I care?
- Who is leading in the Bush-Gore race?
- How is this going to affect the public?
- What is “Gallup tracking”?
- What is the “fine print”?

#### *Predictions*

- Bush will win.
- He will discuss the way the independent women voted.
- He will explain what the spread represents.
- He will tell why the volatile voter is a myth.
- [I prompted, “What is a myth?”] A myth is a fairy tale or a lie.

After generating these lists, I asked, “Is there an overlap between your questions and predictions, and the teacher’s questions that you have to answer?” They said yes. Then I pointed out that in just a few minutes, they had activated expectations to help them read with more attention, as they could look for these points in the article.

The assignment for the next class session was to read the article and try to answer their own and my questions. To encourage them to monitor their comprehension, I told them to note anything they didn’t understand and how they got back on track. I would request a progress report but not yet collect the assignment. After class, two students

said, “This helps. The article is so dense. I wondered why he is making such a big deal about independent women” and, “It’s hard to tell the difference between the drama in the article and the important points.” These comments encouraged me that students would find the approach helpful.

*Critical Reading Steps Five and Six: Read the Article and Review Your Questions.* By our next meeting, about half had read the article at home. In class, I asked them if the pre-reading exercise had helped; these were their responses, which I listed on the blackboard:

It kept my attention focused—I didn’t fade out and I read the whole article.

It helped me notice the key points.

Knowing about the topic made the article understandable when it wasn’t before.

It reinforced my understanding of the topic—I had to apply my knowledge and think it through.

The highlighting [my underlines of selected passages in the copy] helped me identify things to focus on.

Next I asked if there were ways that the pre-reading was unhelpful, and I received the responses below. This generated a discussion that the list of questions didn’t have to be long, but one could focus on what one was most interested in, or on what was most important for the assignment. Their comments showed that even with pre-reading, relating an article to difficult technical concepts for deep understanding is no simple task.

The list of questions generated in class had so many items on it that it distracted me from the homework questions.

The whole article was still confusing. I had to read it paragraph by paragraph and put it together.

It helped to stick to the homework questions.

Then I asked about comprehension monitoring: “Were there parts that confused you?” “How did you resolve the confusion?” The consensus was that the passage about independent women was confusing and its relevance unclear. Students generated the following remedies:

I noticed his language. It was conversational. There was a bridging sentence, “How can this be true...,” then, “But, more to the point...” That told me that this was his main point.

Maybe what he said about independent women was a joke, to make it lighter. [I asked, How did you know this?] He mentioned it, but then he got to the real point.

“Flighty” isn’t a serious word. You only use it as a joke or as an insult.

I then called their attention to the title and asked, “So what’s the myth?” A student responded, “That the voters are volatile—really it’s sampling error.” As we discussed sampling error, I detected errors in their understanding of the statistical concepts, which gave us the opportunity to go over those concepts again. The discussion ended with a cliffhanger: The last study question isn’t obvious and requires an inference based on topic knowledge. I clarified what the question was asking, without answering it, and told them to read and submit their answers in writing.

*Critical Reading Step Seven: Answer the Study Questions.* Seventeen of the 24 stu-

dents completed the assignment at home by our next meeting. (The remaining seven had not been keeping up with the coursework before this.) I asked them how much the exercises had helped. Some said that the two sessions on reading techniques were enough, a few said they would have liked more. One said that reading the article was still difficult, but without the discussion it would have been impossible.

The quality of their answers was much better than that of former students who had worked in small groups but had not been taught the reading strategies. Fourteen students got the first answer fully correct, appreciating the irony about “independent women”; two more got the answer partially correct. In the past, the majority had missed the humor. Fifteen and fourteen students, respectively, got the second and third answers fully correct; two more had the answers partially correct; in the past, most had gotten them at best only partially correct. The last question on close elections elicited a wide range of responses: two explained it fully, seven explained it partially, and eight could not answer it. This question was by far the most difficult, both in the statistical understanding and in the inferential reasoning that it required. But in the past, very few had gotten it even partially correct.

Because this method uses valuable class time, instructors may want evidence that it genuinely makes a difference in students’ understanding. Therefore, samples of students’ responses, compared with those of a previous class that did not receive reading strategy training, are shown in an Appendix at the end of this article. They illustrate differences both in accuracy and in specificity in explaining the concepts and confirm that the time spent teaching critical reading strategies was productive in improving students’ understanding of statistics.

Although the percentages of correct responses fell short of my expectations, they were still encouraging. It would be too much to expect that two reading sessions would correct a lifetime of reading deficits, especially with difficult new concepts. Still, the reading sessions clearly helped when compared to the quality of work I received previously. The majority of students who completed the assignment paid more attention, and participated more, than they did in lectures covering math alone. I like to think that they did so because they found the sessions useful, because even if they didn’t understand the material they could contribute something, and because they sensed that they would finally find out the secrets of this mysterious activity that so often stumped them.

### **Conclusions**

Working with critical reading in my statistics class taught me several lessons. First, it revealed how much help students need with college reading, even more so with technical content. While I thought a newspaper op-ed would be a relatively simple place to start, for my students it was quite difficult. They needed much guided practice to make up for their poor reading skills. Second, I saw that learning statistical methods alone does not insure learning the “statistical thinking” so important in our field. Getting the homework problems correct was not sufficient for understanding the article. Students benefited from applications that expose them to the concerns and perspectives of professionals, and my students said this activity made them think more meaningfully about the statistics they were learning. Including applications dispels the idea that math is just formulas that will never be used outside the classroom. By giving students an opportunity to discuss issues about which they can have opinions, it removes some of the “absolutism” that makes math so intimidating. Math professors who may feel they are in foreign territory or pressed for time, may include reading. It is important to note that progress can be made and interest level raised, even in just a few discussions of simple pieces that occasionally highlight key topics in the course.

In the future I plan to introduce more of these activities in order to build students’

conceptual understanding and reading skills over the semester. This experiment convinced me of the mutual benefit of integrating reading with statistics; I hope it has convinced my students, too.

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### Appendix

#### **Sample Student Responses with and without Reading Strategy Training**

##### *Without reading strategies*

1. According to the article the main suspect as the source of volatility is independent women.
2. It is very hard to tell because only a group of people that represents the entire U.S. participates.
3. Because men are more likely to vote within their parties affiliation than women. Women tend to be more independent.
4. The author says the closer the election, the easier it is for a sampling error to exist and also it is more likely for people to change their minds.

##### *With reading strategies*

1. It states that the results of polls swing so wildly due to sampling error.
2. The article states in a typical poll that the sampling error was 4%. Therefore there would need to be over 8% spread between candidates.
3. The sample size of each subgroup is smaller being the reason why the sampling error gets larger when the sample gets broken down.
4. Because of sampling error the polls get too close to call. If Gore is say to be leading Bush 52 to 48 but there is 4% margin of error, there is a possibility that they may be tied or that Bush may in fact be leading.

# Communication Theory in the Classroom

Percy Haynes  
*English*

On my first day as a substitute teacher in a classroom of the New York Public School system, a well-meaning teacher warned me: "You are going into a war zone." There was good reason for the grim image which that teacher presented of the classroom to which I had been assigned. The regular teacher had become a casualty of the violence afflicting the city's schools. He was injured by a student who struck him with a chair on the head. On subsequent teaching assignments, other teachers reinforced the initial warning: "As a teacher, do not have even the slightest hint of a smile on your face. The students will interpret the slightest intimation of a smile as a weakness. Take full control of the class." In short, I was advised to adopt the autocratic style of teaching in the classroom.

Since that first day in a public school classroom in New York, incidents in the schools have supported the hard line suggested by my advisors. The reality of police outposts in the schools, bordered by metal detectors to keep guns and other weapons out of the classroom, is certainly a strong argument for autocratic tactics by teachers. Yet, in my approach to teaching in elementary schools and presently at Borough of Manhattan Community College, I have not followed the autocratic style of teaching dictated by the behavior of students, particularly in the elementary schools. Instead, I have considered the classroom as a communication situation. I have, therefore, followed the principles of communication theory which emphasize the two-way process of promoting understanding between teacher and students.

The communication theory, which is applicable to all situations in which people interact, does not view such interaction as merely the transmission of the message (information/knowledge) from the sender (teacher) to the receiver (student). The communication theory means more than that. The communication theory conceptualizes an interactive relationship in which the receiver plays a vital role. The receiver gives the sender the feedback which indicates the degree of the effectiveness of the message.

My use of communication theory to establish social relationships in the classroom is based on my conviction that each student brings to the classroom experience, ideas and knowledge. I consider that the challenge to me, as a teacher, is to assist in stimulating the potential of each student for self-actualization. The idea of giving a voice to students goes beyond the objective of the realization of their full potential as students, as well as actors in their communities. I think that such self-actualization is intimately related to the educated imagination promoted by literature and language to give students a vision of the world beyond the social mythology of the world in which we live.

Explaining this concept of two worlds, Northrop Frye (1964) in *The Educated Imagination*, presents the image of some intelligent man chasing status symbols, who comes to the realization that "if he recognizes no other society except the one around him, he can never be anything more than a parasite on that society" (p.151). Frye concludes, "as soon as that notion dawns in the mind, the world we live in and the world we want to live in become different worlds. One is around us, the other is a vision inside our minds, born and fostered by the imagination, yet real enough for us to try to make the world we see conform to its shape" (p. 151).

The use of literature and language to create in the minds of students the vision of a world beyond the world around us is, however, not at variance with the order of the assigned curriculum in the establishment of the social relationships in the classroom.

This first step is certainly obvious, indeed elementary, but it is worthy to be men-

tioned. On the first day of class, I ensure that every student receives a copy of the syllabus. The syllabus, of course, is not written on a tablet of stone, but it is subject to change from the feedback of the students. What, however, is of primary importance is to emphasize to the students that our objective is to create a community of learners. As an integral part of activities during the semester, the students, therefore, take turns at presenting their writing for feedback from their peers.

This approach of creating a community of learners in the classroom represents a departure from the situation in the traditional schools, which according to Dewey (1998) "... was not a group or community held together by participation in common activities" (p. 60). Dewey points out that the normal, proper conditions of control were lacking and to a considerable extent had to be made up for, by the direct intervention of the teacher, who, as the saying went, "kept order." Advocating the kind of social control exercised in what are called the new schools, Dewey says, "... the primary source of social control resides in the very nature of the work done as a social enterprise in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute and to which all feel a responsibility" (p. 61).

In promoting the idea of a social enterprise in the classroom, as suggested by Dewey, I involve students in the learning process by various means. For example, before and during my introduction of new topics, I present questions to the students. That approach of asking questions helps me to gauge the knowledge base of the students- an important element for communication in the classroom. For example, in my English 201 course at Borough of Manhattan Community College in fall 2006, a student answered a question about the riddle of the Sphinx in the Greek tragedy *Oedipus, the King* by Sophocles: "What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?" The answer: "Man," who crawls as a baby, walks uprightly in his youth and adulthood, and eventually needs a walking stick as he ages. I think that the student's answer to the riddle of the Sphinx must have encouraged his classmates to read the tragedy.

The idea of asking questions to stimulate responses from students is an old idea. It is an idea put into practice two thousand four hundred years ago by the Greek philosopher, Socrates, who realized that people understand more by answering a question, instead of being told the answer. This idea is the heart of a new tool for teaching, known as a Classroom Communication System (CCS), which is discussed in an article on the Internet entitled (n.d.), "Teaching with Classroom Communication System-What it involves and Why it works." Contrary to the impression conveyed by the title of the paper, the experiment is not about high-powered network technology for classrooms that can do magical things to help students learn better, and take some of the load off hard-pressed teachers. The paper explains, "The main idea behind the CCS is about bringing teachers closer to their students. It is not about taking the teacher out of the loop and having computers teach students. And, it is not about interposing a computer system between teacher and students, replacing their regular contact."

The Classroom Communication System (CCS) teaching tool originated from a study funded by the National Science Foundation in July, 1992. A startup company called Better Education Inc was charged to develop the new teaching, which has been shown to act both as a facilitator and as a catalyst for improved teaching and learning. The pedagogy that it spawns seems to have a remarkable quality that not only helps students to learn better but also makes their classrooms more active, lively and happy places."

The CCS methodology is applicable to a wide range of disciplines, including reading comprehension, chemistry, biology, mathematics, political science, law, psychology, business negotiation, and history. The CCS has enabled teachers to overcome the daunting challenge of interacting with over thirty students, some of whom insist on sitting on the chairs at the back of the classroom. Even in the big class sizes of the 21st century, CCS facilitates the use of the Socratic method of teaching.

I must admit that the lively discussions inspired by the Socratic technique sometimes cause noise in the communication resulting from several voices competing for attention. Like the noise in a radio or television program, competing voices in the classroom undermine maximum benefit from the various contributions of students to the particular discussion. I have, therefore, introduced the procedure (even under the Dewey system, there must be some degree of order) of students raising their hands to take turns in expressing their views.

Opening a classroom to different views of students on a subject enables me to encourage students to develop an attitude which I consider to be vital for good relations between individuals, communities, as well as nations: tolerance for the other view. Tolerance of the other view is, of course, a basic objective of the Academy. Therefore, I discourage labels. In a discussion on a selection for the English 101 Final Examination—*Being a Man* by Paul Theroux, a student expressed her disagreement with Theroux's dislike of society's image of masculinity, labeling him as "crazy." Another student gave balance to the exchange of views by explaining that the sensitivity of some men is discouraged by the norm set by society. The exchange gave me the opportunity to reinforce a basic principle of societal relationships, as well as writing: the most outrageous view must be judged on the evidence presented in support of the writer's opinion. The encouragement of different views in the classroom promotes what Frye calls "the speech of a free society," instead of "the speech of a mob" (p.148).

So far what I have focused on about students sharing their work, getting feedback and showing tolerance for the other views really revolves around the foundation stone of participation in the classroom. As all teachers are aware, the tendency is for one or a few students to participate in class discussions, while the majority of students remain passive and silent. In the absence of this aspect from the CCS technique, the challenge for me has been how to prompt some contribution from the silent students to the discussion. After unsatisfactory experiences with the lecture/discussion format, I have shied away from that approach. Instead, I have settled on group work: three groups of students, each discussing a particular question based on the reading assigned for homework. The group leader ensures that each student in his/her group participates in the discussion. The rapporteur of the group presents the response to the other classmates for general discussion. In the role of instructor, I fill the gaps in the responses of the groups.

During Fall 2006 Semester, the classroom was enlivened by a role play of *A Rose for Emily* by William Faulkner, and the Greek tragedy, *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. In the mock trial, Miss Emily was charged with the murder of Homer Barron. In the case of *Thebes versus Oedipus, the King*, Oedipus was charged with killing his father, marrying his mother and causing the plague on Thebes. I must admit that there were shortcomings in the trial. Both the prosecution and the defense got stuck on the declaration by the blind prophet, Teiresias that Oedipus himself was the murderer. The performance of the tragedy stopped short of Oedipus' final realization that he was the murderer of his father, King Laios. What the court proceedings lacked in detail, however, it made up in the enthusiasm and the lively participation of the students in the roles of judge, prosecutor, defense lawyer, witnesses and jurors. It is reasonable to hope that the students were motivated to fully read this Greek tragedy with the renewed interest it deserves.

In view of the students' evident involvement in the images of the computer, videos and movies, some attention must also be paid to the relevant use of the tools of the new technology. With that in mind, I arranged a film show of Shakespeare's *Othello, the Moor*. In a follow-up session, we discussed the rise and the fall of the tragic hero, Othello.

The objective of building the learning process on the knowledge and the cultures of students is particularly important at Borough of Manhattan Community College, and other community colleges. This is so because the majority of students at community col-

leges are outside mainstream America. This has implications for the training of teachers, as pointed out in an article entitled "Preparing for Cultural Responsive Teaching" (Gay 2002). According to Gay, "Because culture strongly influences the attitudes, values, and behaviors that students and teachers bring to the instructional process, it has to likewise be a major determinant of how the problems of underachievement are solved." Observing that this mandate for change is both simple and profound, Gay explains: "It is simple because it demands for ethnically different students which is already being done for many middle-class, European American students—that is, the right to grapple with learning challenges from the point of strength and relevance found in their own cultural frames of reference. It is profound because, to date, U.S. education has not been very culturally responsive to ethnically diverse students."

The concept of building on the knowledge and ideas which students bring into the classroom is supported in a conceptual framework of scaffolding through which many educators are rethinking the learning experience. The idea of scaffolding in the learning experience is discussed in the article, "Literacy, Cultural Diversity, and Instruction." Lee (1992) states, "The premise behind culturally sensitive scaffolding is that the teacher uses the students' prior cultural knowledge as foundation or support for school learning."

Lee discusses three models of culturally sensitive scaffolding: (1) Signifying and the Interpretation of "Speakerly Texts," which was developed for a group of African-American high school seniors; (2) Talk Story, Turn-Taking, and Classroom Discussion, based on culturally appropriate rules for turn taking in social conversation, reported in the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) and similar projects with Navajo, Pueblo Indian, and Athabaskan Alaskan children and (3) Community Funds of Knowledge and the Practice of Literacy, based on a study by Moll and Greenberg (1990) in which community-based knowledge in a Hispanic community is appropriated as a focus of classroom instruction.

Since I consider the classroom a communication situation, something is missing from my article: feedback from the students. At the end of Fall 2006 Semester, I asked students for their feedback to the following statements:

- What I liked best about the course
- What I liked least about the course
- How the course can be improved

The group work and the court trials attracted the most favorable response from the students. The survey also revealed support for the students' views on the Readings. That response supported my view that students respond warmly to the opportunity to express their views on topics. Dislike was, however, expressed for some readings which were considered "boring." Ideas for improving the Course included: free-writing, Journal entries and more videos, reflecting students' obsession with the I-pods and other gadgets of communication technology. I value particularly the comment of one student who said: "... the Professor needs more authority to get all the students involved in the Course (responses, trials and class participation). It seems that I must take into consideration that initial advice on my first day of teaching in a school in New York.

In this article, I have explained how, despite the nature of my introduction to teaching in a classroom in New York, I have adopted the democratic, rather than the autocratic approach to teaching. Given the reality of the New York culture and its impact on first year college students, it would be misleading to give the impression that it is always smooth sailing. In addition, I am not suggesting that the teacher should abandon the responsibility for the creation of an atmosphere, conducive to the learning process in the classroom. I have simply explained my style of interacting with students in the learning

process. My teaching style has been dictated by my personality, as well as my firm belief that students bring into the classroom their own special knowledge and ideas created by their culture and life experience. I consider it my responsibility to do as much as I can to tap into those resources of the students.

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# The Dialogue Continues ... Can a Culture of Learning Develop in Cyberspace?

Robin G. Isserles  
*Social Sciences*

This paper addresses some of the positions raised in the last two editions of *Inquirer*, with respect to the political and pedagogical concerns of teaching on-line<sup>1</sup>. Drawing on some of my experiences teaching a distance learning Introduction to Sociology at BMCC over the past several semesters, I will chart my own reservations with this technological medium of education and present some examples which demonstrate some unanticipated and rather positive outcomes. Despite my relative appreciation and enthusiasm for distance learning as an educational option, I will conclude with a discussion of important aspects of the on-site classroom that *cannot* be replicated in an on-line learning environment.

## **Reservations**

I sympathize with several of Diana Judd's overall concerns that distance learning might lead to the "possible death of education as we know it" (Judd 2005:46). In fact, I do worry that the emphasis on individualized learning, which distance learning does much to foster, leads to the prominence of acquiring skills as the *basis* for education. Such an emphasis on skill acquisition leads necessarily to a pre-occupation with educational outcomes, paving the way to a consumer-orientation toward learning. This, I would argue, is quite antithetical to the learning that facilitates a deepening of intellectual curiosity and development, which is so important for the health of a democratic society. While this consumerist model is not limited to on-line education, it perhaps begs the question if distance learning speeds up this process.

Yet, my initial reservations centered on pedagogical questions. In particular, was I going to be able to re-create the kind of "culture" that so often develops in my on-site classes? By culture, I mean a familiar group with its own norms and patterns of behaviors. I had always depended on the recognition of names, voices, and the physical space of the classroom, including where everyone sat, to enhance the learning process. In this way, my vision of the classroom and the learning that takes place there has always been quintessentially Dewey, who emphasized the importance of the social or relational aspect of learning.<sup>2</sup>

Not only does a general culture evolve, but more specifically, a culture of learning that is assisted by the familiarity of those in the classroom setting. A culture of learning is the social experience of being a student. In other words, the development and shared understanding of expectations, diverse backgrounds and goals, a respect for one another and the learning process, and an intellectual curiosity to go beyond where one was when they entered the classroom at the beginning of a semester. Inspired deeply by the works of Paulo Freire<sup>3</sup> and bell hooks,<sup>4</sup> for me a culture of learning both requires and reproduces the active engagement and thoughtful participation of students, the ability for students to take ownership over their own learning, and to think critically about what they are

<sup>1</sup> In particular, Judd, D. (2005) Ex-Education: Privatization, Commercialization, and Pedagogy. *Inquirer*. Volume 12; Foster, R. (2006) Reply to Diana Judd, "Ex-Education: Privatization, Commercialization, and Pedagogy. *Inquirer*. Volume 13; Rose, L. (2006) Grab Your Beret and Put on Your Smocks: Reflections on the State of the Art of Teaching (and Learning) at BMCC. *Inquirer*. Volume 13.

<sup>2</sup> See in particular, John Dewey. 1916. *Democracy and Education*. The MacMillan Company.

<sup>3</sup> Paulo Freire. 1970. *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum Publishing.

<sup>4</sup> hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress. Education as the practice of freedom*, London: Routledge.

learning. When I began my training in Distance Learning, the question was, could this happen on line, and if so, how?

A second and related reservation was how was I going to know whether the students were “getting it?” Like many of us, I tend to rely on a lot of non-verbal communication from my students—yawns, nods, glances at watches/cell phones, and of course, the “moment”—when the student gets something, when it starts to sink in, when they’ve considered something for the very first time. We see this in their eyes, in their body language, in the quickness and eagerness with which they raise their hands to include themselves in the discussion. How was I to read any of this on line? Here, I am not talking about formal ways of assessing how much students “learn,” but rather those day to day moments of enlightenment—cues that students are following discussions, thinking perhaps in a new way. This is what sociologists call the unleashing of the “Sociological imagination”<sup>5</sup>—making connections between their own lives and the “life of society” (Mills 1959).

### ***Some Hopeful Evidence***

In thinking about these concerns for several semesters now, I have found in the work of my students many examples of intellectual development and critical thinking. Additionally, students are able to communicate the “a-ha” moment with me and their fellow students. Space does not permit a full exposition of this data, but I will highlight two examples that demonstrate the capacity for a culture of learning to develop in an on-line course, and which have eased some of my initial concerns.

The first example is extracted from a set of student responses to an excerpt of W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*.<sup>6</sup> This reading is designed to help students understand Du Bois’s concept of the “Double Consciousness” as it relates to and illuminates the development of the Sociological Imagination.<sup>7</sup>

Upon reading the excerpt I ask the students to respond to the following question:<sup>8</sup>

In your own words, what does Du Bois mean by the “double consciousness” of African-Americans? Do you think the concept of “double consciousness” is still useful or relevant in contemporary American society? If so, how? If not, why not? Please explain. What were your reactions to this reading? What did it make you think about?

Here is an example of a posting from a student:

I think what Du Bois meant was that as a black person there were two “people” living inside one. It was the “Negro” and the “American.” Living as “two” never really allowed them to be aware of, or see who they really were. They could only see themselves the way others saw them .... I think the “double-consciousness” can fit the people from middle-eastern Countries like; Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan etc .... They could have been born in America and really consider themselves American but because of the Terrorist attacks and the Wars They have become two inside one, the “Terrorist” and the “American” because they can see the way all the others see them .... I thought this reading was marvelous. I was like WOW when i was done. From what i understand of it; Du Bois is telling us how hard it was ... for a “Negro” to even be considered “normal” in a sense. *Student A*

<sup>5</sup> An important introductory concept is the Sociological Imagination, coined by C.Wright Mills (1959).

<sup>6</sup> Du Bois, W.E..B. 1903. *The Souls of Black Folk*.

<sup>7</sup> The course is Introduction to Sociology, Soc 100/981.

<sup>8</sup> This question is posted in the Discussion Board, part of their weekly assignments. As a requirement for the course, students must respond to my question and to one other students’ posting for each question.

Here is a response to Student A by another student:

.... I had noticed that after the September 11th incident these nationalities would make extra effort to fit into society by putting up American flags at their place of business and when you would walk into the stores most of the people behind the counter are no longer dressed in their traditional clothing but they have chosen to adapt to the western way of dressing or they would hire other races in the areas where they would have to interact with customers .... Even in these days and times we are still uncomfortable embracing who we are because we are looking at ourselves through the eyes of how the world sees us and we want to be different to them. *Student B*

Here is a further exchange between two other students,

I can actually give an example of it happening within my family. My family is from Puerto Rico and one of my aunts married a white man and now lives in Florida with him and their two children. I go down there about twice a year to visit and ... you wouldn't even believe she came from a Puerto Rican family, where her parents barely speak English. She is fluent in Spanish but you couldn't tell if you met her. Everytime we go somewhere ... she will say something like "that is so Spanish, don't do that" .... See for my aunt her two-ness is that of "the wife of a white man in a white neighborhood" and the "Puerto Rican" girl she once was. The funny thing is that when she comes to visit in NY she is the Puerto Rican" person again. It flips that way because she is always worrying about how they see her and when she comes out here how we see her. *Student C*

I think it's really interesting that your family member "discriminates" against the "spanish" side of her. But do you realize that this duality is also so relevant within every race? Has any of you ever read "When I was Puerto Rican" by Esmeralda Santiago? It's a beautiful autobiography about a coming of age and when she talks about her childhood in Puerto Rico, Santiago mentions that she never wants to be a jibara which from what I understood meant uneducated, common folk. She talked about her mother forbidding her to do and say certain things, because she said that only jibaras do them. Santiago's family didn't have a lot of money, and when they traveled to affluent neighborhoods, she said that she was considered a jibara. Now, all this exists in our society as well. There's constant struggle in social status and the way one is perceived .... I was born and raised in Moscow and I always knew that who aren't from Moscow or St. Petersburg are less educated and lower than I am. They look just like me, but we're different. It's amazing to me that this "double consciousness" is so prevalent in today's world, that there is not a single race, color, or creed that escapes it. *Student D*

Just these four passages offer tremendous insight into the culture of learning that is created, as well as the moments of enlightenment. These students are truly engaged in the material and developing important intellectual skills and sensibilities. In the first passage, the student expands Du Bois's concept to include other racial/ethnic minorities, especially those of Middle Eastern descent. The student even identified the "twoness"—terrorist/American. This student was clearly engaged in the reading and the discussion that followed. Student B took the first example and included other observations of the internal struggles of Arab-Americans. Her observations were offered as support of the relevance of this concept for today. Student C drew on a personal example of her aunt living out to her two-ness, and Student D drew on a piece of literature that was relevant to the comments of student C, then reflected upon her own experiences from her native Russia.

After reading a difficult piece of text written over 100 years ago, these students demonstrated a clear understanding of the subject matter, in this case, the concept of double consciousness, as developed by Du Bois. The students found ways in which it was still relevant to contemporary US society, they expertly engaged their Sociological Imaginations offering personal examples, observations and literature to support their ideas.

The second example is an assignment on the classic, "Body Rituals Among the Nacirema"<sup>9</sup> to introduce the students to the sociological concepts of culture, ethnocentrism and cultural relativism. For this reading assignment, I have the students write their first formal paper. Upon receiving the papers, it is clear that the majority of the students do not realize who the "Nacirema" are. So I write the following Discussion Board question:

Okay, so now that the papers are in ... who are the Nacirema?

After glancing quickly over your papers for now, several of you had some very interesting descriptions: Unusual, Abnormal, Sexual disorder, Barbaric, Masochistic, Foolish, Unexplainable, Indigenous, Superstitious, In need of pity, Shocking, Made my skin crawl, Culturally different from us, Truly scary, Unreal, Questionable lifestyle, Sick culture, Made me appreciate my culture, Totally different from the way we live...

Hmmm ... what is Nacirema spelled backwards???? So, I'll ask again, WHO ARE THE NACIREMA? (some of you got it)

Now, I'd like you to think about why I assigned this essay for you to read?

What do you think of the Nacirema now?

Here are some examples of the posts responding to my questions:

When I found myself harshly judging this culture I felt bad and wanted to know more about them. In doing some follow up research I found a paper that stated the point that Horace Miner was trying to make in proving that we are too quick to judge others. By doing that he put this paper together to make it seem like he was talking about some African Voodoo tribe when in fact all along he was speaking about us, and not us years ago but Americans today ... I was embarrassed to see that I could be one who is also quick to judge cause my description of this culture initially was just Horrific and Barbaric. The most interesting part to me was the mere word Nacirema is just American spelt backwards. This assignment was truly mind blowing! *Student E*

I think this reading was the best way to make us better understand the sociological concepts. The concept of culture shock within our culture especially for those who didn't know until now. Many may have experienced Sociological imagination, wanting to know all the why's of the Nacirema people. I also think this reading was perfect because it made the familiar strange and it allowed us to be ethnocentric against our culture. As we continue on in this semester looking at all different types of cultures its best that we learn not to be ethnocentric towards them, because the same way we may think their culture is weird, they may think the same about us, or think of us as Miner put it in his study or what we thought of ourselves after reading Miner's article (before we knew it was us). I feel it is important for us as students of Sociology to learn that the worst thing you can do is be ethnocentric. Again this is why i feel you assigned this article, its the perfect eye opener. *Student F*

I read the reading about three times before I noticed the metaphors. When I finally understood what I was reading I said out loud this is us ... The author just put a twist

<sup>9</sup>Miner, Horace, 1955. "The Body Rituals among the Nacirema". This is a classic work written in 1956 of a fictitious professor who writes about some of the hygiene practices of American society in a way that a foreigner might interpret them.

to it to see how judgemental people are when they come across a culture different from theirs. When I first read the paper I was thinking what type of people live like this, not knowing I was actually reading about my own culture. *Student G*

Several students called the article “mind blowing,” “eye-opening,” and such reactions are fairly consistent semester after semester. Clearly these students were not only “getting it.” They demonstrated a sound understanding of the concept of ethnocentrism, not just as an academic term to memorize; they understood it in terms of how they have been victims to it as well, and how easy it is to judge what is not familiar to us. Furthermore, from the first student’s posting, we see an example of how seriously students take their assignments. Student E wanted to know more about this group and conducted further research to learn more. The self-reflection that all of these students expressed was so impressive and, again, shows clearly the intellectual growth and culture of learning that is possible on line.

Though these are but two examples, they are not atypical of the virtual conversations that take place in my distance learning courses. Such posts have eased my initial concerns and highlight that, indeed, a strong culture of learning can occur virtually. Furthermore, I think these examples respond quite well to three important learning objectives Diana Judd lays out in her article, objectives which she is skeptical can happen online—the importance of students to think and write critically; to question that which they take for granted; and to think for themselves. These examples demonstrate that these objectives are certainly achievable in a distance-learning course.

Despite my initial fears, a culture of learning is possible on line—a faceless, virtual culture. The students really are “talking” to each other, albeit behind computers. They become familiar with names and written voices, rather than faces and spoken voices. Sometimes students identify with a student’s last name (i.e., “are you Dominican too?”) or recognize names from other classes they have taken.

Moreover, we see clearly how these students develop as students. They are learning what it means to be a college student. When asked to write a substantive reaction to a reading, they are carrying out this task. Often times they go beyond what is required and research a discussion they found interesting, suggest relevant books to read, or provide links to recent newspaper articles that are about the subject of our discussions. In this way, they act as the experts of their own knowledge production, carrying out further research, and sharing this information with one other.

### ***But wait just a minute—the social-relational aspect***

In Roger Foster’s fine critique of Diana Judd’s piece, he discusses one of the problems with the onsite class—the spontaneity of learning—that is transformed in an online class. While I sympathize with his desire for students to reflect a bit more before answering a question—something that an online class affords—with several semesters of virtual teaching under my belt, I find myself missing the spontaneity of the “real time” classroom. Some of my fondest memories of my own college experience were discussions that grew out of other discussions that went a bit beyond the subject material. Or of the professors entering the classroom with fresh copies of that day’s op-ed piece, reading it together at the same time, and discussing it at that moment, *together*. While I can post a link referring my online students to a current article, there is something lost when we are all reading it separately and posting sporadically over the course of a few days.

Even more important than the spontaneity, though, is the social, physical, even visceral experience of learning that is so difficult to translate to the virtual classroom. Hearing the voices of other students asking and answering questions, sharing someone’s book or article as we read excerpts together as a group, looking around at the expressions of fellow students, laughing out loud along with students and teachers, or going

through that collective “a-ha” moment when we come to an understanding of a concept, idea, or article *together*. These examples resonate with Dewey’s notion of education as self-development that necessarily comes through social interaction with others. Quoting Dewey, Michael Brint writes, “[t]he effort at isolated intellectual learning contradicts its own aim,” for it “precludes the social sense which comes from sharing in an activity of common concern and value.”<sup>10</sup> Brint posits, drawing on Dewey, that the social environment, where students learn from each other and actively participate together in the learning process, is necessary for intellectual development. Thus, the individualization of distance learning would run counter to these educational and democratic principles.

Oftentimes, my onsite students tell me that they understand the material much better after we go over it together, expressing that there is something vital and sacrosanct about experiencing new information together in real time with others. Perhaps this rings so true to me because I am a Sociologist, but the social experience of the classroom with all of its sensory dimensions is such an essential part of the culture of learning. On-line, learning is an individual experience in an individual environment—alone, isolated on one’s computer—albeit more convenient, but ultimately a lone endeavor. And though there are moments of cooperation, of helping each other, of a sort of social engagement, these are but moments in virtual time. Hence, I ultimately agree with Lisa Rose when she writes,

An academy where technologies, devoid of human (and I would add “social”) mediation, are the only teachers would indeed be a deadly place. The real alternative is not the eschewal of technology, but an open and flexible hybrid experience where students engage in some “chalk and talk” courses and some fully online, and still others somewhere in between” (Rose 2006:80).

There are some very positive pedagogical aspects to distance learning, as I am learning with each semester that I teach with this technology. Some of my initial worries have turned out not to be justified, at least to the extent that I had feared, and there have been some quite surprising positive outcomes. Still, I remain convinced that there is something socially important and pedagogically invaluable in the sort of learning that takes place in the real classroom, in real time.

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<sup>10</sup> Brint, Michael. 1996. “Being Digitally Educated, Dewey, Technology, and Distance Learning” <http://enhanced-learning.org/prox/paper1.htm#note14>

# World Enough in Time

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In an ambling conversation about my faded dance career, I confessed to a much younger colleague that because in my days of glory I used to worry about my weak, unshapely feet, I would concentrate on developing my scrawny calves. My friend looked at my legs and opined that they seemed okay to him. "Yes," I replied, "but only after decades of hard work!" Later on, while reviewing this exchange, I realized once again that young people do not appreciate Time. Although many of them submit to the superstition of progress, they firmly believe that things have always been the same. Yet, during English 201 class discussions, my charges often begin their claims with the expression "at that time." I counter that their use of the expression requires quite a few citations of relevant historical texts.

Actually, when I eventually do assign research papers, I choose my topics from such sources that establish, for the students, the backgrounds that provoked the texts we examine. However, I control the use of resources and strictly format the assignment. I do so in order to make clear to the students that research is not interpretation. This approach also helps to promote clear writing and to prevent plagiarism.

In general, whenever I have to refer to a fact, I send the students off to Google key words. This tactic serves to postpone controversy. In this way, the Internet bears the burden of the students' awful discovery that a belief is sometimes really only a prejudice. For example, I use the Internet in cases of the students' recourse to the annoying phrase, "at that time."

The truth is that the students seldom understand cause and effect. If they did, then my classes would be able to elaborate on process. I find that it is difficult for them to put even their own life stories in chronological sequence. Similarly, students often state their thoughts in one-word outbursts and not by using fully developed sentences in the active voice. Consequently, the facts they state remain isolated from the context of the question asked.

Anyone who teaches remedial composition courses knows that students have difficulty explaining how a claim plays out as a proof. Furthermore, for many of them, "ocular proof" (*Othello* 3.3.360) merely satisfies a pre-existing notion of theirs and does not lead them onto new paths: students tend to see what they think they have seen before.

My argument is that, whereas the writer's work arises from a conversation with his time's public, the value of that work depends on how deeply it speaks to the human condition. Worthwhile criticism should take on both dialogues. Therefore, my struggle to teach the class to do so relies on a syllabus that focuses on time. Naturally, the authors' contemporaries share time with him or her. Nevertheless, all of us participate in the essential universal experience of our being human together, then and now. This experience takes place in time and it relates to what we understand as Plot.

When a plot points to consequences that the reader finds acceptable, it usually corresponds to experience. The problem is that the students do not follow the logic of the plot because good plots are not arbitrary. Instead, they are moral statements. Therefore, in order to teach literature, I try to demonstrate to the class what exactly motivates the actions that determine the plot.

I keep this interest a secret because the class should learn, on its own, how to understand that a reasonable life profits from experience in time. I deliberately do not foreground my intent because if I were to tell the students what I want, they would only

repeat my opening statements for the rest of the semester. So I disguise my agenda in order to lead the class to the realization that it already knows a good deal from the experiences of its own lived lives.

In *Profession* (2005), Haun Saussy examines the model for competent literacy in terms of a person's "becoming able to read the standard-setting works of literature in a language" (Saussy 114). He is talking about a way of being in language (Saussy 118): "You become competent in the normal, regular, regulative, rule-bound patterns of language in order to read texts that defy the rules, contradict the patterns, ironically suspend much of what you took so long to establish" (Saussy 117-118). For Saussy, the reader peels away the layers of understanding that apply to the words the writer uses. Reading is not a mechanical process. Instead, it involves an active, ongoing analysis of the context and possibility of language. Meaning includes not just what the words mean now to a particular reader, but what they mean to all the readers that have had an acquaintance with them. Finally, the sense of the written word under examination expands to confront the writer's probable intent in choosing and arranging that word in a sentence. Reading is excavation. Reading is thus a "sedimental" act of cultural memory because "there are three languages that must be learned to attain literary competence: spoken modern language; written modern language; and the classical language, which is read and written though not spoken" (Saussy 119). I understand from Saussy that reading takes place in Time.

My English 201 syllabus begins with the "Gettysburg Address" and Lincoln's exhortation that a failed nation ought to return to its founding principles. The next readings include Lincoln's "Second Inaugural Address" and King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Consequently, religion rears its controversial head by both leaders' indirect references to Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity" and to the ideal that a community should be like a city on a hill, for all to see and to marvel at. Evidently, King's modern sermon against back-sliding gains in force when compared to Lincoln's previous nineteenth-century complaint.

Occasionally, one or two of the students resents the religiosity of the texts. I accept this opposition, but only as long as the class understands that I argue from Sacvan Bercovitch's position that, rhetorically, American public discourse stems from the jeremiad (Bercovitch 148-210, Blight 117, 119). In any case, the class ought at least to appreciate that religion sometimes shapes literature.

The semester's next object of study is Joyce's "Araby." In examining this short story, it is impossible not to take a close look at the impact of turn-of-the-century Irish Catholicism on male adolescence and on the consequent adult male sexuality. There are very few complaints or protests now. Sometimes, there is, however, an initial hesitation to join in the discussion because the students must refer to their own embarrassing, adolescence. Eventually, though, their being able to refer to their lives encourages them to make statements with confidence and authority.

By the time we arrive at the semester's main text, *Othello*, I have accustomed the class to look at the various works in light of religion, race, sexuality, and psychology. I think it is important to score points with these approaches because I will combine all of them to introduce the class to Shakespeare's devastating revelation of the human condition. The students will encounter the pathetic, humanizing folly of the Venetian Moor.

"Araby" alludes to folly. The story's last words include "vanity." Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address also does so, for both words. Yet, for me, the locus of Othello's attention surpasses mention of these terms when Iago judges Roderigo's irresolution: "How poor are they that have not patience" (*Oth.* 2.3.370).

Iago counsels Roderigo wisely because he plays his own devil's advocate. Iago intends to take Roderigo out of himself by making him realize that he acts in the realm of

Time. After all, the fool Roderigo proves available to Iago's theft of his money because he does not anticipate the inevitable result of letting another man have access to his wealth. The arrogant refusal to accept a humble place in the great web of Time focuses Roderigo's attention on only what immediately intrigues him. Throughout *Othello*, the failure to think ahead in Time misguides all the main characters because they are self-deceived about how important they are in the world.

Usually, as homework, I ask the class for a paragraph explaining this statement. The cleverer students read on and spot the expression "dilatatory time" (*Oth.* 2.3.373). Later, in class, I send students off to Google the phrase "possess yourself in patience" or "in patience possess yourself" (Luke 21.19).

In this way, it becomes possible to examine how the appreciation of time supports human wisdom because impatience is the Moor's chief failing. Indeed, Othello's near-pagan idolizing of his white bride Desdemona and his own over-investment in his military reputation contradict his claims to Christian propriety. Ludovico's regret at witnessing the Moor's "unbelievable" incivility (*Oth.* 4.1.242) expresses just how far Othello goes in enacting an un-Christian inconstancy (*Gal.* 3.26-28). That is Shakespeare's point and mine.

Galatians 3.28 reads, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." In teaching *Othello*, I strive to explain to the class that Othello fails in Venice because he does not accept himself as a citizen of the state. He is always the Moor to himself. The unfortunate general relies on his achievements to establish his personal worth. Othello believes that his anxious fears prove to be true. That is why, when he loses his occupation, he despairs of his life. No true Christian would do this. Therefore, the convert Othello reveals his unbelief to the audience. He is a wildly impatient man whose grandiloquent suicide serves to contradict his true worth to the state and to himself.

So, if I am diligent, I should succeed at getting students to appreciate Time's discipline. Although at the semester's end most of the class may remain baffled by Wordsworth's lament that the world is too much with us, they will still be amazed by the intensity of their reaction to Walt Whitman's grief because of the poet's account of the slow, heartbreaking passage of a funeral cortege.

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# Health Fairs: A Feasible Venue to Promote Health Awareness Among Students

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Are health fairs a feasible venue to promote health awareness? The faculty of the Health Education Department (HED) at the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) posed this question at a staff meeting in October 2004. In pursuit of an answer, research literature was reviewed and a feasibility study conducted in December of that year. The study was set up as a health fair with the objective to increase students' awareness of health issues. Feasibility of the venue was determined by the level of student interest, the ease of implementation, and whether the objective was met. Overall, the findings support health fairs as a feasible means to promote health awareness among BMCC students.

Research studies examined in the literature provided a model for the HED-sponsored health fair. The common purpose of the studies was to disseminate health information and conduct physical screenings. Some of the assessments utilized in the research were: blood tests for hyperlipidemia, dental examinations, glaucoma vision tests, dermatological screenings for melanoma, and cancer risk factor questionnaires. Participants in the studies were typically adults, over 40 years of age, mostly female, and mostly of African American ethnicity; only two of the health fairs focused on young children. Most of the health fairs researched were conducted at churches and community events, while only one was conducted at a school. Clearly there was a need for more research about the utility of health fairs among student populations, as well as the need to inform our youth about potential health risks.

Health concerns of today include cardiovascular diseases, cancer, cerebral vascular disease, and diabetes. These chronic diseases account for the leading causes of death among Americans, 29%, 22.9%, 6.8%, and 3% respectively (National Center for Health Statistics, 2003). Yet these diseases are preventable, as health status is *most* affected by lifestyle. The manner in which a person chooses to live his or her life evolves from individual decision-making. He or she may decide to select a healthful diet or not, to exercise or not, to smoke or not, or to use safety precautions when riding in cars and bikes; choices like these are made everyday. The impact lifestyle has on one's health status is significant, and it has been measured in terms of a fifty-one percent contribution, while genetics has been determined to contribute approximately twenty percent to one's health status (Brown, 2005). Thus, promotion of healthy lifestyles is an important function of educational institutions, like BMCC which is concerned about the long-term health of its students. The HED-sponsored health fair would therefore emphasize information that focused on healthful behaviors.

Utilizing the findings of other studies and a behavioral focus, the HED faculty launched a campus-wide health fair on December 1, 2004 in the Richard Harris Terrace. Ten informational booths were set up displaying fact sheets about chronic diseases as well as recommendations for a healthy diet, exercise, and risk reduction. The booths were stocked with reproducible, public domain brochures downloaded from websites of government agencies and health organizations, including the NYS Department of Health, NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Centers for Disease Control, National Institutes of Health, United States Department of Agriculture, and US Department of Health and Human Services. BMCC's Women's Resource Center also provided information specific to women's health, and a staff member from the Center was avail-

able to discuss sensitive issues with students. Other organizations that provided useful informational materials included the American Cancer Society, American Heart Association, American Diabetes Association, American Dietetics Association, and American Public Health Association. Some of these organizations also sent representatives, who were available to answer students' questions.

In addition, clinical screening areas were set up, each manned by one health instructor and several trained assistants. At the body composition booth, students had their body fat assessed utilizing a hand-held electrical impedance instrument. A small electric current was emitted through the student's body, and the tool measured the amount of body fat, based on the path of the current. Flexibility fitness tests were also administered. For instance, a *sit and reach task* was designed to see what distance students could reach beyond their toes to determine their level of flexibility. Another screening station provided computerized nutritional assessments, utilizing lap top computers that had Nutri Calc software installed. This enabled students to input their typical food intake and receive a computerized nutrient analysis of their diet. The output contained easy to read bar graphs and pie charts displaying the contents of their diet.

The Health Education Department collaborated with several departments in the college to conduct the fair. For instance, BMCC's Media Center and Computer Center assisted the Department (HED) in implementing the nutritional assessment activity by lending their equipment and technical support. Other departments provided assistance with the screening activities. The Allied Health Department assigned several students the task of measuring respiratory function of the health fair participants who visited that screening station. Spirometers were used to assess lung capacity, while at a neighboring screening station sphygmomanometers were used to assess blood pressure. The Nursing Department scheduled nursing students to measure participants' blood pressure during shifts at the health fair; any participants identified as hypertensive were referred to their individual physicians for closer monitoring. Thus, collaborating with other departments resulted in a health fair that provided a full range of screening services and a greater breadth of information.

A final component of the health fair was evaluation. Students voluntarily completed exit surveys when they reached the last station of the health fair. A total of 240 surveys were collected. The findings of the survey indicated that students were pleased to obtain information, and they became more knowledgeable and concerned about their health by attending the health fair. Moreover, students expressed significant interest in the interactive booths because the exchange was hands-on and personal. The most popular interactive booth was the body composition station followed by the flexibility screening activity.

The health fair conducted at BMCC on December 1, 2004 was successful in a number of ways. It generated student interest as evidenced by the number of participants. The ease of obtaining health-related brochures by accessing governmental websites greatly facilitated the dissemination of information. Furthermore, the willingness of advocates from non-profit health organizations to man booths and answer students' questions helped achieve the goal of raising student awareness of health issues. Utilizing faculty and advanced level students to conduct health screenings at each station was a practical means of providing BMCC students with quality assessments and subsequent guidance regarding healthy behaviors. The goal to screen students' health status and promote awareness of health issues was achieved with relative ease and at a low cost.

In conclusion, health fairs conducted in school settings appear to be a feasible venue for health promotion. Therefore, the Health Education Department should consider planning subsequent health fairs to provide BMCC students with opportunities to assess and realize progress in their health.

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# Speaking Publicly for Those Who, for Whatever Reason, Can't or Won't

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"Amazing as it may seem, many Americans appear to consider public speaking a fate worse than death." This claim probably has about as much validity as another academic urban legend concerning Eskimos and their many terms for "snow" (Bierma, 2007). Although it may not be possible to discern the whole pattern of reproduction that has kept this shibboleth in print for as long as it has, I will offer some suggestions that bear directly on the administration and teaching of BMCC's required public speaking course, "Fundamentals of Public Speaking," better known as SPE 100.

The quotation marks that you see at the outset have been used to indicate that these words appear exactly as printed... in Stephen Lucas' textbook, *The Art of Public Speaking* (Lucas, 2007). The text is a very popular one and is used by all the BMCC instructors teaching SPE 100. Originally published in 1983, it is now in its 9th edition. By a wide margin, a 1997 national survey of more than 300 Speech departments identified Lucas' text as the most frequently assigned (Robinson, 1997).

Like any good scholar, Lucas properly attributes his startling revelation to the "researchers" who reported that 41% of their survey respondents identified public speaking as their greatest fear. Those researchers, however, prove to be an anonymous crew, as is often the case with corporate documents. The Bruskin Report, Lucas' source, was the handiwork of R.H. Bruskin Associates, a marketing research firm in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Apparently Bruskin Associates had a good run during the 1970s and 1980s. In the early 1990s the company was swallowed by a UK firm. Shortly afterward that company was acquired in a deal with a London-based financial services firm (Honomichl, 1992). Originally the chief business of the company was to track brand recognition for other American enterprises. Their clients represented a cross-section of American corporations, including the tobacco industry. Many of the Bruskin surveys would eventually be used as evidence in litigation aimed at extracting billions from the tobacco industry for suppressing the health risks of smoking.

The Bruskin Report was regularly issued during the company's heyday. One obvious benefit of the reports was to boost the brand recognition of Bruskin Associates. Number 53 was titled "What Are Americans Afraid Of?" and may have been published in July of 1973. Where it was published or how many copies were distributed is unknown. To my knowledge no library in the world holds a copy. Nor is there any reference to this particular report in the major newspapers of that summer. What happened to the corporate assets, the back issues of the Bruskin Report, or any stray copies of issue number 53, is a mystery awaiting solution by someone far more diligent than I.

The report, however, has a palpable presence, at least in public speaking textbooks. In 1989, Mary Pelias took an interest in what has been variously called speech anxiety or communication apprehension. She surveyed the way many popular speech texts covered the subject (Pelias, 1989). The Bruskin Report ran neck and neck with information drawn from a 1977 bestseller titled *The Book of Lists* (Wallechinsky, Wallace, & Wallace, 1977) as the most likely source for discussions about what appears to be a commonly accepted fact: many people get nervous when faced with the prospect of standing in front of an audience.

Why the Bruskin survey has had such an influential status is not easy to unravel. There were clearly several factors at work. Post World War II America witnessed the rise of survey research and the social sciences. These instruments and these fields proved extremely valuable for American capitalism. Marketing research became synonymous with science. This was also a period when American higher education boomed and departmental turf underwent considerable reorganization. The social sciences elbowed their way into the curriculum, often at the expense of the humanities. Within many Speech departments this disciplinary struggle was mirrored in an evolutionary renaming. "Speech" gave way to the hybrid title, "Speech Communication" (reflecting the influence of quantitative studies), only to capitulate to "Communication" (presumably a more inclusive domain name).

It is also true that the textbook industry underwent some fundamental transformations of its own. A deeply conservative enterprise to begin with, the modern textbook has succumbed to a marketing logic that parallels corporate branding. The notion that any single individual – say a Stephen Lucas – has authored a contemporary text is a quaint reminder of another age. The modern textbook is a product of a corporate authorship which is highly responsive to market demands (Schemo, 2006). Lucas stands in relation to his text as does any middle manager to the company products; in short, at a great distance.

In this environment, clearly the public speaking expert was losing his or her voice. When *The Art of Public Speaking* was first published, it wasn't difficult to read the handwriting on the wall. Is it much of a leap to imagine that the most pressing task for a discipline under siege was to demonstrate the need for its services? What better tools to make the case than those of the competition? In the 1970's, when R.H. Bruskin Associates, as well as the authors of *The Book of Lists*, were commanding attention, public opinion polling did more than tease out public attitudes. Market research was effectively writing a table of contents for the zeitgeist. Never mind that the spirit of the times may have been of their creation.

Thirty years on, it seems fair to ask if there is any reason to believe a claim as ridiculous as this one about the greatest fear?

I don't have much doubt that many, many people are unhinged by stage fright, speech anxiety, communication apprehension, or whatever you want to call quaking on your feet while facing an audience. Any speech teacher can recount experiences watching a student turn shades of red before fleeing the classroom in mid-sentence.

The real difficulty with this overblown understanding of public speaking fears isn't that it's wrong; there is a problem with the quality of the data. This extravagant depiction masks the variety of behavior that is taking place. It lumps together everyone who dreads a podium and doesn't distinguish anything beyond the ordinary nervousness most of us feel – even a BMCC instructor on the first day of class. The distinctions that could be drawn weren't at all clear to me when I began teaching the basic speech course at BMCC. Midway through my first semester, however, I had a student who focused my attention.

She was a single mother. When she told me as much after class—her eyes riveted to the floor, unwilling to meet mine—I figured this had something to do with her absence on the day of a scheduled speech. A long account about a cousin who was supposed to come over and watch the baby then followed. Pause. And it was also true that she used to stutter.... In fact, so did her daughter.

Later that week I saw a handwritten notice taped up in a hallway. It advertised a film being shown by the Psychology Department titled "Spit It Out," a documentary about stuttering (Skurnik, 2004). At the conclusion of this autobiographical film, the fellow who starred in it addressed the audience. Jeff Shames' stuttering is severe. Standing at the

lectern in person he was as disabled as we had just witnessed him to be in the film. There were long waits as he grappled to form particular words. Then suddenly an explosion of terms would spill out. And yet not one of us in the audience seemed unsettled or leaned forward in a sign of impatience. When I got an opportunity to corner Jeff I mentioned the single mother, even her daughter. Ah, that's common, he responded. There's a genetic pattern.

Back in SPE 100 I talked at length about the film. To my surprise, in the two sections I was teaching, 3 students acknowledged that they stuttered. Two, one Hispanic, the other Italian, had received treatment for their stuttering. The single mother, who, incidentally was African American, had not. Unlike the other two students, she dropped out of the course.

The following semester I changed my syllabus a little. After printing out the title of the course, and where and when it met, I pasted – right up front – a paragraph about the college policy on accommodating students with disabilities.

*Academic Adjustments for Students with Disabilities*

Accommodations will be made for students with disabilities who identify themselves to the instructor at the beginning of the course. Students with disabilities who require reasonable accommodations or academic adjustments for this course must also contact the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities. BMCC is committed to providing equal access to all programs and curricula to all students.

To be honest, reordering the paragraphs on the course outline didn't produce any significant changes in the way things panned out. Here's why.

There's a wealth of information about the effects of stigmas. For most people with verbal fluency, stuttering conjures up a full plate of indelicacies. To be afflicted with a stutter is to be labeled as incompetent, unintelligent, backward, etc. (Whaley & Langlois, 1996). This is true in the educational environment and this is true in life far beyond the classroom. To fend off a stigma as damaging as this requires a high state of alert, a well fortified defense, a great deal of silence, or total denial. Not one of these strategies encourages self identification as the student who needs special accommodation, the formal step mandated in the college policy.

This set of concerns may affect a relatively small number of students, but it surely accounts for a disproportionately significant number of those who fail the course. There is good reason to take note of this fact. College wide, the course is among those most likely to be failed, in turn contributing to lowered retention rates. Need I also note that a unique, individual student may have lost a chance to get an education?

In subsequent semesters, I've encountered other students with what is technically termed a speech pathology. The range of these speech problems extends well beyond stuttering and is often tied to hearing loss or some other physical impairment. For these students there is a perfectly good reason to fear this course. In some instances a student is confronting the full implications of a disability for the first time. Some arrive with documentation and a record of help delivered. Some don't. Figuring out which ones need our help isn't an easy matter, particularly when this work is left to adjunct instructors—the vast majority of instructors for SPE 100.

A small number of colleges and universities that offer a basic public speaking course, perhaps as few as 18%, have put in place screening procedures before a student enrolls in the class (Robinson, 1997). This is a campus that could be a model for programs that aimed at this need. The public high schools of New York City appear to have had limited success identifying and aiding students with serious speech problems. This community college must meet this challenge if its mission of equal opportunity, particularly for its minority students, is to be taken seriously.

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# A Tri-Modular Program for Overcoming the Fear and Loathing of Speaking in Public

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Communication Anxiety/Public Speaking Anxiety is a serious concern in all fundamental public speaking courses, as well as in other college courses. Extensive research has been conducted to determine the causes of Communication Anxiety/Public Speaking Anxiety (CA/PSA) in students and to assess various treatment options within a classroom setting. At the same time, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy has become widely acknowledged as the most effective form of psychotherapy for treating fears and phobias within a private therapist/client setting (Beck, 1995, p. 1). This author developed the Fear and Loathing program by adapting Cognitive Behavioral Therapy's (CBT) main strategies (as well as other techniques) used to treat individuals suffering from anxieties and phobias in order to help speech students overcome their CA/PSA in a classroom situation. This author also conducted a study to test the effectiveness of the program. The results indicated that the Fear and Loathing program significantly reduced the CA/PSA levels in virtually all participating students.

Some communication researchers have proposed a treatment model in which the individual cause(s) of each student's CA/PSA is determined and then matched with the appropriate treatment. However, CBT theory proposes that all fears and phobias are rooted in a single cause: misguided and "nonconscious" belief systems about the particular situation that provokes anxiety (Beck, J. S., 1995, p.5). The "Fear and Loathing" program adapts this CBT approach to overcoming "stage fright" or public communication anxiety as its core component by working on three levels: the *behavioral* (learning and practicing strategies for preparing and delivering oral presentations), *emotional* (learning and practicing relaxation, breathing, and visualization strategies), and the key level, *cognitive*, which entails guiding individual students toward greater awareness of the incorrect belief systems regarding the public speaking experience that both cause their anxiety and fear about speaking in public. Once students become aware of the nonconscious and erroneous beliefs that fuel their anxiety, they are then guided through a process that challenges the veracity of these fears.

This paper reports on the main features of the "Overcoming the Fear and Loathing of Speaking in Public," and the results of a study conducted during the fall semester of 2005 by this author in order to assess the effectiveness of the program. At the beginning of the semester, 82 students enrolled in a basic public speaking class took a "Fear of Speaking" self-assessment test in order to gauge their levels of CA/PSA. They then retook the test at the end of the semester, after going through standard course material, as well as the "Overcoming Fear and Loathing of Speaking in Public" program. The two sets of scores were then entered on an Excel spreadsheet and analyzed using a t-Test Paired Two Sample for Means. The results indicate the "Fear and Loathing" program substantially reduced student CA/PSA.

The strategies used in the "Overcoming the Fear and Loathing of Speaking in Public" program make use of the standard CA/PSA treatment features adapted from CBT. These include (1) progressive desensitization, (2) identification and challenges of negative thoughts and beliefs, and (3) creation and rehearsal of positive replacement thoughts, and positive visualizations. According to CBT, the cause and effect relationship between thought, emotion, and behavior is the main instigator of CA/PSA. All emotions, sensa-

tions, and feelings, including CA/PSA, result from thoughts or belief systems that are habitual and probably “nonconscious,” that is, not registered by the person’s conscious awareness, but not necessarily buried so deep in that person’s unconscious that these beliefs would require months, if not years, of psychoanalysis to unearth. Therefore, the primary strategy in overcoming any fear, phobia, or negative behavior pattern is to help the person become aware of any automatic, negative, and habitual beliefs, predictions, and assumptions about an object or situation that, in turn, lead to such negative emotions as anxiety and fear, and, finally, to reactive and negative behaviors (Lubetkin & Oumano, 1991). Once these beliefs, predictions, and assumptions surface into awareness, their validity can then be challenged through controlled experiences that prove these thoughts are actually false. At this point, the erroneous thoughts are replaced by new, positive thoughts based on “more realistic ways of thinking” (p. 28). More realistic and accurate thought patterns reduce CA/PSA because they do not simulate emotions such as anxiety and fear. Behavior is altered because it is the anxiety and fear (CA/PSA) that often cause reactive, negative behavior patterns such as failing to prepare for a speech, skipping class, or even dropping out of a speech communication class.

Therefore, the main focus of the Fear and Loathing program is to identify and then change negative belief patterns in order to reduce anxiety and fear levels, as well as self-defeating behaviors those emotions instigate, such as avoidance (not preparing presentations, absence from class during presentation days). Like cognitive behavioral therapy, the program does not deal with any other contributing factors, such as childhood experiences. Neither do the Fear and Loathing program and cognitive behavioral therapy focus on whether a fear/phobia such as CA/PSA is biologically based or a result of social learning.

The Fear and Loathing program was developed by this author after co-authoring two self-help books with a cognitive behavioral therapist. After successfully applying CBT techniques to help individual students whose communication anxiety was particularly severe, she created the Fear and Loathing program, which applies those therapeutic strategies to a classroom situation. Over the course of teaching many classes of Fundamentals of Speech Communication (SPE 100), the program has been retooled and refined so that it is effective whether the individual’s CA/PSA is mild or severe.

### ***Program Strategies***

The “Fear and Loathing” course component differs from other academic CA/PSA treatment programs in a number of ways. One, it adapts the standard CBT single client-single therapist experience to the college classroom context. Moreover, it makes positive use of this added group dynamic to increase individual awareness of one’s negative belief systems, as well as a sense of community. Third, it uses the process of overcoming CA/PSA to reinforce skills acquisition.

The “Fear and Loathing” program accomplishes its goal through a number of strategies described below.

#### *Strategy One: Using the Fear Buster Chart*

*The Fear Buster Chart* helps guide students through brainstorming and group discussion toward greater awareness of the specific fears and beliefs that are provoked by the prospect of speaking in public. Students are asked to list all their fears in the first of a five-column fear buster chart (moving from left to right) that they will revise throughout the semester. They are asked to list at least five fears.

For example, a common student fear is “I’ll forget what I wanted to say!”

The second column of the chart lists all the thoughts about what will happen if

their fear comes true. For example, two common thoughts about what will happen if “If I forget what I wanted to say” are “Every one will laugh at me and I’ll be humiliated” and “The professor will give me a bad grade.”

The third column of the chart lists positive, accurate, replacement thoughts that counter each of the negative thoughts listed in column 2 about what will happen if a particular fear comes true. For example, “If I forget what I want to say, I can use my speaking notes to remind me,” “I’ve observed practiced public speakers forget, consult their notes, and move on smoothly,” and “I prepared and practiced my speech to the point where I know what I’m doing.”

The fourth column is used to rate the student’s level of belief in each new and accurate replacement thought, according to the following numerical system:

1=I don’t believe it at all.

2=I believe it intellectually but not emotionally.

3=I believe it completely.

The fifth and final column provides space for the student to brainstorm on experiences he or she can seek out in order to increase belief in each new replacement thought. The instructor provides a list of possible experiences to enhance belief. For example, “I can observe how often my professors and professional speakers forget what they want to say next, and that they simply consult their notes to move on without any mishap.”

Students are instructed on how to use the Fear Buster chart whenever they experience anxiety related to speaking in public. First, as soon as they sense anxiety and fear, they quickly retrieve the automatic thought that created those feelings. Second, they replace that mistaken belief with its positive counter thought.

Working with the chart helps students recognize that it is not the actual situation of speaking in public that causes anxiety but their interpretations of the situation.

### *Strategy Two: Relaxation Techniques*

*Relaxation Techniques* such as simple yogic breathing (long inhalations through the nose followed by long, sighing exhalations through the mouth) and a contraction-tension release exercise are taught for use at home or in the classroom.

### *Strategy Three: Visualizations*

*Visualizations* follow at least a month after students start working on their fear buster charts. They participate in an in-class group visualization/journaling experience called “The Circle of Excellence.” In this exercise, the class is asked to distinguish between perfection (an impossible and self-defeating ideal) and excellence (the best you can do). They then stand together at the center of the classroom inside an imaginary circle. While in the circle, they are instructed to close their eyes and imagine a situation in the past when they felt confident. They are then asked to transfer that confident feeling to imagining themselves delivering presentations in the classroom. In another part of the exercise, each student thinks of a public speaker that he/she admires. They are asked to analyze precisely what qualities that person possesses that makes him/her such an effective presenter and to adapt those traits for their own presentation styles. They are then invited to enlist that person as a permanent speech coach. In between segments of the exercise, students are asked to avoid speaking and to return quietly to their desks where they write for a few minutes on the experience. Following the exercise, students are asked to share their experiences on a voluntary basis.

While many professors rely on teaching positive affirmations and visualizations to challenge students’ CA/PSA, according to CBT theory, positive visualizations and affirmations such as “The Circle of Excellence” are ineffective if they are practiced *before* taking

other corrective steps, including the following:

1. Becoming aware of the habitual negative thoughts/beliefs/visualizations that have been creating fear and anxiety
2. Creating and practicing the substitution of positive, accurate replacement thoughts
3. Learning how to induce a relaxation response that allows the person to invest a significant level of belief in the visualization or affirmation.

These steps are necessary because negative, incorrect, and nonconscious thoughts that are already in place will prevent new, positive affirmations from taking hold. If the negative and habitual thoughts are not uprooted and challenged before working with positive affirmations and visualizations, the practitioner can become more frustrated over his or her inability to reduce the fear and thus can grow even more anxious.

#### *Strategy Four: Systematic Desensitization*

*Systematic Desensitization* involves repeated exposure to the feared object or experience in order to reduce the level of fear. All students are required to deliver several different types of presentations, in escalating order of difficulty.

#### **Skills Acquisition**

*Skills acquisition* is a major component of any basic speech course. Students are given intensive instruction in organization (outlining) and delivery techniques, which are essential skills for successful oral presentations. Following each major speech, students are required to write a two and a half-page essay that assesses their experience in preparing, practicing, and presenting the speech. They are additionally required to note which skills and strategies were used, what areas were successful, what areas need improvement, and to form an "action plan" on making improvements. They are also asked to reassess their fear levels and to note what strategies helped or failed to help overcome their fears. In order to insure compliance, the grade for the presentation is withheld until the essay is handed in.

Taken together, the above strategies have proven to significantly reduce CA/PSA in those students who participate fully in the program. However, it is essential that students be reminded repeatedly throughout the semester that these strategies for overcoming CA/PSA will not help reduce fear levels if they have not sufficiently prepared and practiced their presentations!

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## **Appendix**

### **Fear and Loathing of Speaking in Public Self-Evaluation Test**

The following test will help you evaluate how willing you are to speak in public. Rate your responses to the statements below, using the following method:

- 1 = strongly disagree
- 2 = disagree
- 3 = neither agree nor disagree
- 4 = agree
- 5 = strongly agree

1. \_\_\_\_\_ I avoid the opportunity to speak in a public setting.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ If I have a question in class or any other public setting, I hesitate to raise my hand.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ The thought of getting up in front of the class and delivering a speech frightens me.

4. \_\_\_\_\_ The thought that I will make a mistake while delivering a speech frightens me.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ When I know the teacher is going to call on me, I have feelings of anxiety.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ When I enter a classroom, I always sit in the back rows.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ If I am called on to speak, I experience symptoms of anxiety, such as dry mouth, rapid heartbeat, or butterflies in my stomach.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ When the professor asks for someone to answer a question, I find myself dropping my head and avoiding her gaze. I don't raise my hand.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ As I wait to give my speech in class, I experience strong feelings of anxiety, such as dry mouth, rapid heartbeat, or butterflies in my stomach.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ When either speaking in public or answering a question in class, I lose my concentration and forget what I want to say.
11. \_\_\_\_\_ Before giving a speech, I find I have to empty my bladder often.
12. \_\_\_\_\_ I look for every opportunity to avoid speaking, even missing class on the day I am scheduled to speak.
13. \_\_\_\_\_ When preparing my speech, I have fantasies of failing horribly, being humiliated, or boring my audience.
14. \_\_\_\_\_ While preparing my speech, I find myself procrastinating, daydreaming, or not staying on target.

# Marketing a Brand that is You

**Mahatapa Palit**

***Business Management***

## ***Introduction***

“Start Here. Go Anywhere” is BMCC’s motto emblazoned in subway cars, the college brochures, and on websites. For a number of semesters in my marketing class, I have grappled with the question, “How can faculty provide a road-map to help students undertake the journey to “anywhere”? To answer this question I developed an innovative exercise entitled “Marketing A Brand that is You” based on the principles of marketing. The objective of the exercise is to help students learn how to develop a career-plan to market themselves to potential employers. This teaching exercise helps students develop a greater self-awareness and explore potential career opportunities that are in sync with their own interests and aptitudes. The exercise does not only increase students’ chances of academic and professional success but also empowers them to take responsibility for their future learning and professional growth.

Marketing is defined as “an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders” (AMA 2004). This definition of marketing can be applied to our own selves just as it can to products, services, organizations, and events. Self-marketing is defined as the way we know, work, and plan to align our career with our personal goals and aspirations while keeping in mind the needs of customers. Who are the customers that we market ourselves to? They are our potential employers and people who will open doors for us.

More than ever before, low job security and high levels of competition at the workplace require students to view themselves as brands that need to be effectively marketed to their employers. Self-marketing is not simply about blowing one’s own trumpets and communicating one’s strengths to the customer. It requires in-depth knowledge of the needs of our future employer and gathering the knowledge, skills and values to fulfill the needs. Our professional success is based on the extent to which we can develop ourselves to match the changing needs of the marketplace. Self-marketing then is an important skill for our students to acquire.

## ***Motivation for the Exercise***

Community college students need a great deal of guidance in developing self-marketing plans. A large proportion of students attending community colleges are first generation college-students with neither parents having gone to college (CCSSE 2005; Willet 1989). Some students do not have role models to guide them on how to navigate their college career and translate their college experience to a vocation that matches their interests and aptitudes. Furthermore, community college students may have a lower socio-economic background compared to baccalaureate students (Bailey 2004). Students with a low socio-economic background may receive support from family members in their careers but may not necessarily receive enough direction on career planning (Usinger 2005).

The low salience of career guidance at home is transferred to the academic environment. The Community College Survey on Student Engagement (2005) reports that a third of community college students do not speak about career plans with an instructor or advisor. Therefore, it recommends that community colleges actively provide career counseling to students. This is important because studies have demonstrated that career

planning is a strong predictor of student engagement and academic success (Kenny et al. 2006) and that college students who have a career plan are likely to do better academically (Thombs 1995).

To address the lack of career orientation, I developed an innovative teaching tool for students in my marketing class to explore career options and outline a tentative career plan recognizing their personal values, aspirations, backgrounds and unique strengths. It is expected that as students visualize their future goals and actively consider their career direction, learning about themselves and ways to reach their goals, they will be empowered to take responsibility for their learning and become more actively engaged with their college education focusing on courses and materials that lead them to their career destination.

### ***Description of the Innovative Exercise***

The National Career Development guidelines (<http://www.acrnetwork.org/ncdg.htm>) indicate three areas important for developing a successful career: (1) personal development and self-knowledge, (2) awareness of the career trends and requirements to meet career goals, and (3) ability to meet and adapt to changing requirements of the career fields by developing a practice of lifelong learning. The technique focuses on the three areas of competency.

The exercise consists of five modules that students complete in a semester, The modules are described below.

#### *Module 1: Who am I?*

The first module, *Who am I?*, focuses on self-knowledge. At this stage students are required to examine their past experiences, parental influences, and other role models that have shaped their personal and work values. Also, students take self-assessment tests that help them consider their aptitudes, work interests and skills. Module 1 is developed as a digital story with students incorporating relevant images, music, and quotes that represent their self-image.

#### *Module 2: Lay of the Land*

Module 2 covers awareness of career trends and requirements to meet career goals. *Lay of the Land* is intended to strengthen students' research skills as they explore career trends, educational requirements and skills required for different types of job positions.

#### *Module 3: How Do I Fit?*

Module 3 deals with strategic decisions students make in order to meet their career goals. Here students consider how best they can adapt to the requirements of the career field and how to refine their analytical skills as they complete a personal Strength-Weakness-Opportunity-Threat (SWOT) analysis.

#### *Module 4: The Road Map*

Module 4 is a time-based plan students develop in order to meet their career goals. *The Road Map* requires students to consider their academic preparation, personal skills, and work experience necessary for them to obtain the desired job in a competitive world. As students develop milestones that they need to achieve so as to reach their final destination, they get a clearer vision of how to prioritize their life between work, school and family to achieve those milestones.

### *Module 5: Reaching Out*

Module 5, *Reaching Out*, is not based on the guidelines of the National Career Development; however, it is considerably important for professional success. This component entails learning how to network, develop skills to interact positively with others and create a resume that focuses on the needs of the employer.

#### ***Effectiveness of the Exercise***

The teaching tool benefits students in four ways. It leads to: (1) a stronger career identity, (2) an increased self-awareness, (3) a better understanding of the marketing process, and (4) development of technical and presentation skills using PowerPoint. The effectiveness of the exercise was evaluated by analyzing open-ended surveys completed by students on Module 1 at the beginning and end of the semester. The survey elicited students perceptions of: (a) working on the different modules of the self-marketing plan, and (b) using PowerPoint to develop their digital story.

#### *Career Identity*

When completing Module 1, students wrote about their career interests and work values. A content analysis of the reports indicated that most students were not clear about their career path. More importantly, many appeared rudderless and did not have strong work values guiding their future choices. The response below exemplifies this attitude.

Over the last five years after I migrated to the United States, I am not sure I recognized the person I had become. I was quite unhappy career-wise. I was not doing something that was fulfilling and stimulating. But instead of what needed to be done to correct this shortcoming I simply drifted with the wind ... and pretty much the direction didn't matter.

At the end of the semester students completed an open-ended survey to determine what they had learned by taking the course. The responses, such as those below, indicate that the exercise helped students think about their future career based on a greater understanding of themselves.

The project is good with respect to getting a more realistic view of my talents and how these would best be applied to the future career that I plan to go into.

It helped in knowing where you would like to see yourself in future and what needs to be done to reach that goal.

#### *Self-Awareness*

The first module encourages students' self-reflection, increased awareness of the different influences in their lives, and it gives them a stronger sense of identity. Also it may serve as a warning bell allowing students to see if their academic and career paths are aligned with what they truly value.

I think the most important value of this project is that we find out and explore ourselves at a deep level. I learned a little more about myself when I did this project. It brought back memories that I had almost forgotten about.

#### *Internalizing Marketing Principles*

The exercise provided an opportunity for students to internalize the marketing concepts that they were studying, as can be seen from the following quotes.

This [exercise] made me realize that at every step I have to include some of these concepts: decision-making, recognizing my problem, sub-cultural influences, learning, the core American culture, social influences, family influences, needs, motives, search, action, problem solving, self concept theory, routine decision making. I realize that everyday in my life I am going through the motions of Marketing.

### *Presentation Skills*

Students need to have strong presentation skills and be good story-tellers. One objective of the exercise was to strengthen students' technical and presentation skills as they used PowerPoint to develop authentic digital stories that was interesting for their audience.

The biggest value is to learn how to choose the important things that you want to show about yourself or any other product you try to market. The other thing that is good is the experience of working with PowerPoint.

### **Conclusion**

The innovative teaching tool developed for an introductory marketing course was motivated by a lack of career direction in community college students. It enabled students to explore their interests, aptitudes, role models, and values. The exercise may also be used in other courses such as consumer behavior or even in introductory courses in other disciplines such as sociology, psychology or career counseling where self-concept and its correlates are covered. By offering this innovative learning exercise early on in the students' college life they can continue to use it to plan and assess the rest of their college experience.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Guidelines for Developing Students' Self-Marketing Plan**

#### *Introduction*

It is 2011, five years since you graduated from college. Based on your interests, talents and aptitudes that you sharpened while at college you have found the career path that truly satisfies you. The college has invited you back as one of their treasured alumni. You are addressing a group of students who want to know how they too can accomplish their dreams. You tell them how you had to first learn about who you are and the plan that you created to reach your career goals. Please discuss the self-marketing plan that you had created that helped you get where you are today.

#### *Who Am I – Understanding Yourself*

Tell Your Story (It may help to have a partner to whom you can tell your story)

- **Brief Introduction:** Speak about where you have come from, your family and close friends, what defines you as a person and significant events in your life.
- **Turning Point:** Describe a point in time which had a great impact on your life and changed you forever; explain how it changed you and what you learned from that time.
- **Interests, skills and achievements:** Talk about things that you do in your time outside work/school; what are some important achievements in your life?
- **Role models:** Talk about some people who had a significant impact on your life. What inspired you about these people? What are important values in your life?
- **Career Vision:** Talk about what you wanted to achieve professionally that satisfied both your professional as well as personal goals.

#### *Lay of the Land: Analysis of External Environment*

- What are some career options that interest you? Indicate the trends in these career options based on research, industry reports on these different career options. Using O\*Net ([www.onet.com](http://www.onet.com)), a career exploration site provide some highlights of the opportunities and threats in these different career options.
- Based on an assessment of the trends in the fields of your choice indicate the one that seemed most attractive to you. What are the qualities necessary for a person to succeed in this field?

#### *How Do I Fit? Analysis of Internal Environment*

- The career center offers online self-assessment tests that will indicate your strengths and weaknesses as they pertain to different career options. What does the Self-Directed Search suggest about your personality type? Go to [www.nyjobzone.org](http://www.nyjobzone.org), get your free account and check out the online self-exploration tools. Develop your profile online on Career Interests. Does the assessment feel right to you? Provide a list of the work values that were important to you and the occupations that offer these values using the Work Importance Profiler.
- Present your personal SWOT analysis outlining the opportunities and threats in the career field of interest to you and your strengths and weaknesses as reflected in the self-assessment tests. What unique values did you bring to this career field that set you apart from competition?

### ***Personal Development Strategy***

Discuss the plan that you developed to find your dream job using the criteria below. Please indicate your accomplishments on each of the following aspects and the significant milestones.

- Education – Academic preparation – courses, credits, GPA. What did you learn from these different courses that helped you along the way?
- Jobs & Internships – What did you learn in these interim jobs and internships? What types of contact did you seek to develop that could help you later in finding a job and advise you on the right type of position?
- Personal development – Discuss leadership training, public speaking, organizing, creative writing, mentoring and other kinds of skills that you learned in your classes as well as through extra-curricular activities.

### ***Reaching Out***

Share with the students the resume that you developed in the last year of your school that indicated your goals, accomplishments and contributions. Demonstrate how the resume was based on all that you have done and accomplished until Year 2010 and how it was specially targeted to the employer and the position that you were seeking.

# Applying Writing Across the Curriculum Techniques in a Teacher Education Course: A Scaffold for Developing Teacher Competencies

Jean-Yves Plaisir  
*Teacher Education*

As I was reviewing a list of assignments and guidelines for students in a teacher education course (ECE 201, *The Exceptional Child*) last semester, one of the students interrupted me to make her voice heard. She said, "Professor, your class is not the only class we're taking this semester. Where are we going to find time to write all of these papers for you? Some of us have jobs. You know?" Other students echoed similar complaints.

It seemed to me that most of the students did not like to read and write. When asked to read, write, and revise their work, the majority of them would simply articulate some familiar ideas and correct a few grammatical errors as a way to improve the quality of their written work. On many occasions, some students *refused to write* anything for me, fearing that they would never meet my standards or that I would judge their writing too harshly. For someone involved in teacher education, I was greatly concerned by such behaviors and attitudes.

It should be noted that teachers are expected to read and write well, reflect on their work, generate reports, model exemplary practices, and facilitate the learning and teaching process for themselves as well as for students in the classroom. When student teachers do not show the dispositions, as well as the competencies, to master those skills, this is not only a temporary attitudinal problem, but also one that could potentially hamper their success as professionals. I conducted this piece of action research as an intervention-strategy aimed at tackling some critical aspects of the problem in my ECE 201 course.

## ***Theoretical Framework***

The set of ideas and techniques that I tried out with students in the course were gleaned through my participation in a Writing Across the Curriculum workshop at BMCC in the fall semester of 2006. Participants in that workshop used a text by Bean (2001), which provided clear insights about problems confronted by both students and teachers in the classroom, as well as some practical strategies for supporting learning and teaching throughout the educational process. Bean observes, "Many of today's students are poor readers, overwhelmed by the density of their college textbooks and baffled by the strangeness and complexity of primary sources and by their unfamiliarity with academic discourse" (p. 133). Bean also proposes ten reasons why students may have difficulties reading and understanding text (2001:133-37). To guide the action research, I decided to focus on four of those hurdles: (1) misunderstanding of the reading process; (2) difficulty in assimilating the unfamiliar; (3) inadequate vocabulary; and (4) difficulty in adjusting reading strategies to the varieties of academic discourse.

### *Misunderstanding the Reading Process*

In the ECE 201 course, I used a text by Nancy Hunt and Kathleen Marshall (2006) that consists of long chapters written in an academic language that was unfamiliar to all of my students. The textbook is filled with concepts and terminology that are widely used in the area of special education. It seemed that the students were not taking time to interact

with the text, and most of them came to class unarmed with the understanding and ideas that could have enabled them to take a more active part in lectures and class discussions. I suspected that some of the students did not purchase the textbook, and a few were probably using copies that were placed on reserve in the BMCC library. Overall, the students seemed content with simply copying verbatim the notes that I wrote on the board. As they were busy copying down notes that they probably did not understand, the students did not take time to ask questions or summarize important ideas from the text. That was precisely the opposite of what I expected a future teacher to do.

#### *Difficulty in Assimilating the Unfamiliar*

It also occurred to me that my students paid very little attention to ideas that were unfamiliar to them. When I looked at some of the passages that certain students highlighted with color markers in their textbooks, I realized that they usually underscored the types of ideas that had already been discussed in class. I was greatly concerned by the fact that those students were not searching for new and provocative ideas in the text. In a way, they were not allowing unfamiliar ideas to come into conflict with the ones that they had already internalized. This type of behavior limits students' abilities to think outside of the box.

#### *Inadequate Vocabulary*

Another hurdle that the students had to surmount was vocabulary development. Is it possible for poor readers to develop extensive vocabulary, let alone to understand a difficult text? By the same token, can poor readers develop good writing skills in any discipline? Bean remarks, "Inadequate vocabulary hampers the reading comprehension of students" (2001:136), and their writing. There was a host of specialized terms that students needed to know in order to grasp the material covered in the ECE 201 course. Interacting with technical vocabulary posed a significant challenge for all the students. They needed support to help them decode that vocabulary, coin working definitions, and integrate the specialized terminology and unfamiliar concepts in their linguistic repertoire.

#### *Difficulty Adjusting Reading Strategies to the Varieties of Academic Discourse*

My ECE 201 students needed to spend time reading texts from a number of disciplines ranging from medicine and psychology to law and teacher education. It was important to expose the students not only to different registers, but also to encourage them to reflect on the different varieties of texts that were introduced in the course. That way, they might begin to adjust their attitudes, read carefully, write clearly, organize their work, take risks, and think critically.

#### **Action Research Questions**

I needed to find creative ways to help my students develop the kinds of professional attitudes and competencies outlined above. Two major questions guided this piece of action research:

1. How could I help my students to read carefully, write clearly, and revise their work?
2. How might I help students to take charge of their own learning, play with new ideas, and develop essential teacher skills and competencies?

#### **Student Participants in the Action Research**

The action research was carried out between October and December 2006 with a class of 34 students that met two evenings a week (Monday and Wednesday from 5:30 to 7:10).

The students were born and raised in various countries, such as the United States and Puerto Rico, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Guyana, Romania, South Korea, and Japan. Regardless of their nationalities and the languages spoken at birth, some of the students had just passed developmental skills courses in the previous semester while others were enrolled in first-year English composition courses. They were taking ECE 201 because it is a required course for early childhood education majors at BMCC. All of the students were women varying in age from 23 to 40 years old, except for an Asian man in his late 20s. Some students had completed 30 or more credits at BMCC, while others had fewer than 20 credits. Over one third of the students were raising families of their own, and some worked in addition to going to school. A good number of the students held jobs in early childhood centers, elementary schools, and various other places.

### ***Methodology***

My research goal was to develop learning experiences and create a supportive environment which would empower the students to read carefully, play with ideas, expand their vocabulary bank, and sharpen their writing skills. I developed a series of assignments that required the students to read for understanding, summarize important points in a passage, ask questions, explain concepts, and write for their peers instead of writing for me. In sum, I involved students in a series of exercises that included: (1) breaking the class into small groups (4-5 members) and assigning each group a set of pages to read on a topic, such as autism spectrum disorder; (2) requiring group members to read and discuss in their groups three important points about that topic; (3) providing time for the groups to record group members' questions or reactions to those points; (4) allowing the groups to make oral presentations focusing on what they learned about a particular topic; (5) encouraging students to do a research project on a topic of their choice; (6) providing students a rubric with which to assess their work; (7) encouraging students to read and comment on their colleagues' papers, providing feedback to improve the content and organization of those papers; and (8) giving the students time to present drafts of their work in class. I usually allotted between 40 to 50 minutes of every class session to engage students in these types of activities. On occasion, students needed and took more time to carry out these exercises.

### ***Assessing Student Performance***

I monitored group interactions to ensure that students were staying on task, following guidelines, and using the tools that were given them to perform in-class activities. I engaged students in analyzing papers and presentations produced by their peers. I gave the students a set of rubrics and guidelines to help them write papers and organize their work. Finally, I used both formal and informal assessment tools (i.e., rubrics, quizzes, exams, and on-going observations) to evaluate the dispositions and competencies that students were expected to achieve in the course.

### ***Results***

The students began to pay relatively more attention to the guidelines and criteria that were established to support their learning. They learned how to summarize important points from a text, and they also used that technique when they had to make in-class presentations, write reflection papers, and generate field assignment reports. In addition, they wrote papers that reflected a rather high level of clarity, coherence, purposefulness and precision. Student papers contained relatively few grammatical errors, their thoughts were focused, and they began to ask open-ended questions. Moreover, the students constructed strong arguments and provided supporting details and insightful examples in

their chapter summaries, oral presentations, field reports, and reflection papers. They began to analyze texts carefully and made relevant connections between activities in the course and professional standards in the field of early childhood education. Some students indicated that the exercises that were conducted in class helped them build skills and confidence in anticipation of the CUNY proficiency exam, which all students must pass in order to graduate. The students interacted with one another in ways that fostered a positive learning environment. Students' motivation to read and write seemed to increase as a result of the pre- and post- reading and writing activities that took place in the classroom. In sum, the reading and writing techniques that I used with the ECE 201 course were generally successful.

### **Discussion**

Bean (2001) argues, "Writing summaries or précis of articles or lectures is a superb way to develop reading and listening skills to practice decentering and develop the skills of precision, clarity, and succinctness" (p. 128). A number of students noted that it was beneficial for them to discuss their ideas and get feedback from their peers as they were reading and writing. It seemed that the students were generally more receptive to the comments and suggestions made by their peers than they typically are to the same kinds of recommendations from me. Participants were, however, appreciative of the guidelines and rubrics that I gave them to help complete assignments successfully.

Encouragement, modeling, helpful feedback, and peer-mediated assessment seemed to have motivated students to think critically and produce good quality work. Bean also observes, "One of the easiest ways to design critical thinking tasks is to ask students to explain course concepts to a new learner" (p. 123). This approach—which requires, among other things, that we place some of the pedagogical burden upon the student—is quintessential to both learning and teaching. It is what I would like to call scaffolding. In my view, scaffolding is any act of acknowledging and supporting a learner's motivation, interest, learning styles, knowledge, and skills. It can be done at any time before, during, and after a lecture, a lesson, a test, or a project. Arguably, action research that seeks out scaffolding strategies may help to improve the quality of learning and teaching in any classroom.

### **Further Research**

While the action research outlined above was carried out for only one semester with a limited number of students, it did, none the less, help the students and me to focus attention on strategies that facilitated learning and teaching in the classroom. Further research is needed to examine the extent to which the kinds of scaffolding strategies utilized with that ECE 201 class would work with different groups of learners in different courses. As a follow-up exercise, I decided to apply the same techniques in a writing intensive course (ECE 102, *Early Childhood Education I*) in the spring 2007 semester.

### **Conclusions**

The results of this action research has led me into thinking that before I could expect students to read and write well, I should provide them with the tools and facilitate the processes that will help them become better readers, writers, learners and teachers. I have also come to realize that students will write as much as an instructor is willing to acknowledge and support students' interests and needs through the learning and teaching process. Both the quantity and the quality of students' work may also vary in proportion to the amount of efforts aimed at making students feel competent and building on their strengths.

At the end of the ECE 201 course, one of the students stated, "I should not have complained about the amount of work that you gave us in this class. This is my career we're talking about. There is more to come." I thought to myself, "At least two of us got the idea." I should not complain about my students either.

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# Challenging Students Across the Skill Spectrum: How Broad Questions Can Catch All Types

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At BMCC, our classrooms are usually a mixed bag: kids fresh out of high school who are barely eighteen years old are alongside 40 year old professionals, people who passed their 'A' levels before arriving in the U.S., and even some graduates with master's degrees from their country of origin hoping to find entrée into American academic life. The perennial question facing us as professors is how best to engage those who seek to be challenged without overwhelming those who are either too under-prepared or are unwilling to meet the challenge? My solution has been to ask them questions. John Dewey has observed that asking questions invokes students' natural curiosity, saying "Only by wrestling with the conditions of the problems at first hand, seeking and finding his own way out, does [the student] think" (Dewey, 1916, as quoted in Bean 2001). To get my students thinking, I started asking them questions that most people, whether they are in school or not, have at some time, however idly, wondered about; and not just any question, but questions like Why is there misery in the world?, or What does it mean to be human?, or (here comes a big one) Are human beings free?

I was inspired to do this by a professor in graduate school who always counseled us to "teach up," that is, to teach to the level you want your students to achieve. He claimed that if you bring along at least some of them, that's good enough. I liked the idea of "teaching up," and the technique seemed effective at the graduate level, but it needed adapting to work in an environment like BMCC. I wanted to maintain high standards of critical thinking, however, many studies have shown that few students come to college prepared to think in this way (Perry 1970). Since I was not willing to conduct the discussion at a level that might leave behind a good portion of the students in the classroom, I had to find a way to teach at a relatively challenging and abstract level, ideally without losing anyone in the class.

Focusing on these broad and deep questions accomplishes at least two things: it excites those who are under prepared because it represents a level of discussion they might not be accustomed to, and at the same time gives better equipped students something to sink their teeth into. Addressing the question of student engagement, Bean has observed that "Presenting students with problems... taps into something natural and self-fulfilling in all of our beings" in a manner that stimulates students to become "actively engaged" with not only learning subject matter, but with life in general (2001, p.2).

This approach was relatively new to most of my students. Many of them admitted to never thinking much, or even at all, about these questions before. In order to get an idea of how they were feeling about this new experience, I asked them to write an anonymous response to several questions including, "Have you ever thought about these kinds of questions before?" In response, one of them put it succinctly: "Honestly, no. I just read what I'm told to read." This same student, however, was inspired to a new level of self-reflection by this approach. In response to the question, "What does it mean to you to be presented with these questions?," this same student said, "It makes me question my own ideas." Another observed, "it means a lot to me to be asked these questions; once or twice I thought about them, but I never really concentrated so much on it before," while another remarked, "I have never thought about these questions, or at least have never thought widely about this... but this really makes me think about my duty as a human being, and I like that, and hope I will learn more as we go along."

My better-prepared students welcomed the challenge in various ways. I had a student from a former Soviet block country with a master's in chemistry who had come here to play American football. He was clearly thrilled at the opportunity to wrestle with the question of human freedom; he came over-prepared for his class presentation, and barely let his fellow presenters get a word in edgewise, to the point that I had to ask him to cut it short and offer him the opportunity to continue the discussion after class. Another was almost relieved to have this challenge, saying "Finally, I get to learn more about the individuals in my surroundings. I like learning about people because it helps me understand why people act the way they do."

At first glance, then, this 'broad-and-deep-questions' approach may seem like a good idea, but perhaps the practical exigencies of teaching specific content in the *community* college classroom make the use of this type of questioning seem too difficult to manage. It is a fair concern. Still, I have found that asking questions on this level can be an extremely effective means of teaching toward and through content, perhaps especially in the community college classroom.

In the past, for example, I would incorporate this kind of questioning into my lectures, taking the section of the introduction to sociology course that deals with socialization, for instance, and asking students to consider the "nature versus nurture" debate, and where they stand on the issue. Other times I had them wrestle with the question of human nature as such, in terms of how and whether it contributes to social stratification.

Along the way, however, I did find that it was a struggle to take the empirical focus of most sociology textbooks to this more abstract level. Luckily, a colleague introduced me to a textbook that actually takes a question of this caliber as the subject of each chapter; it is called, fittingly, *Ten Questions*, by Joel Charon. For teaching sociology, for example, the 'big' questions made it possible to organize the subject matter in a different way from the usual introduction to sociology textbook. Most of these texts are data driven and deal with the big issues of sociology in the beginning. At the outset, they usually contain an introduction to the sociological point of view, followed by a discussion of the process of socialization, the meaning of culture, and the characteristics of social structure. They then go on to deal with specialized discussions of institutions such as the family, religion, politics, medicine, and education. Charon's text accomplishes these goals by asking *questions* that correspond to these elements of sociological thinking in a more abstract, but in my view, far more approachable way than the standard answer-driven texts. His question, "What is sociology and why do sociologists study society?," serves as a form of introduction to the topic and its methods of analysis. Socialization and culture are addressed by asking, "What does it mean to be human?" A discussion of social structure is broached by asking, "How is society possible?" The question, "Why is there misery in the world?," opens the conversation to not only to a discussion of social stratification, but also social inequality, culture, and values. The question of whether human beings are free, also deals with culture, power, social control, socialization and institutions.

Of course, using such textbook is not a necessity for treating your subject matter in this way, but I found it to be very helpful, and I suspect others in other disciplines would as well. Textbook or not, each of us can help our students follow the threads that tie our disciplines to the big questions and then teach our way back to the specific content. The themes in our disciplines are already there. We just need to introduce them in the context of the kinds of questions a mildly curious person might be likely to ask of the world, whether they are in school or not.

This approach has been quite popular with my students, at least. They have felt respected, challenged, and, as one of them said so well, the questions are about "how we look at the world, how we think about the world, why is it the way it is; I like this [approach] because it wants get down to the bottom of everything." Who could ask for a better goal from any college student, no matter how they approach it?

# Contributors

**Yeghia Aslanian** teaches in the Developmental Skills Department. He is interested in both writing and reading, and especially in the interrelationship between the two. He emphasizes the reciprocal developmental relation between reading and writing and encourages his students to “read as writers and write as readers.” In Professor Aslanian’s view, students are the active agents of learning and teachers are facilitators.

**Page Dougherty Delano** teaches in the English Department. In addition to teaching intensive writing (Eng 095), she especially enjoys teaching World Literature and Contemporary Urban Literature. Her current research concerns women and World War II (on rumors about race, on “the girl problem,” and fiction writer Kay Boyle). Another writing project is a collaborative memoir, *Red Heads*, about 1970s activism.

**Brahmadeo Dewprashad** teaches in the Department of Sciences. He teaches Organic Chemistry I and II, General Organic and Biological Chemistry and has mentored numerous students. He brings to the classroom a wealth of practical experience in the subject areas he teaches. He has developed several commercialized products and uses this professional experience to help students make connections between chemical concepts and their many practical applications.

**Jack Estes** teaches sociology in the Department of Social Sciences and Human Services. His main area of interest is popular culture, particularly film, television, and sports, and attempts as often as possible to incorporate these themes into sociology classes. He also likes humor, con artists, travel culture, poetry, and fiction.

**June Gastón** teaches in the Mathematics Department. She is also the director of the CUNY Teacher Academy at BMCC. In a career spanning over thirty years, she has taught mathematics at every level, from middle school through the graduate level. A former computer systems analyst, Dr. Gastón has always sought and used appropriate technology in her mathematics classroom.

**Annette F. Gourgey** is an educational research consultant and teaches in the Mathematics Department. In her teaching, she combines concern with teaching skills for self-directed learning with current methods for teaching “statistical thinking,” or the conceptual understanding and problem-solving of statistics professionals. She believes that learning is deepest when literacy skills (reading, writing, mathematics, and critical thinking) are integrated; and that math anxiety is best overcome through applications that help students replace confusion and failure with meaning and accomplishment.

**Percy Haynes** teaches in the English Department. He particularly enjoys seminar type discussions with students focusing on relating classroom topics to current national and international events. His teaching philosophy is based on the conviction that every student has the potential for the development of his/her particular talents. Mr. Haynes brings to the classroom experience gained in the Foreign Service of Guyana. He is interested in Postcolonial Literature and hopes that interest will be reflected in a memoir.

**Robin Isserles** teaches Sociology in the Department of Social Sciences and Human Services. She teaches Introduction to Sociology and the Sociology of the Family, both on-site and on-line. A central goal for her is to create a culture of learning that requires the active engagement and thoughtful participation of students, to enable them to think critically

about what they are learning, and to grow intellectually in the process. In addition to the sociology of teaching and learning, Dr. Isserles also writes on feminist theories of care.

**Rolando Jorif** teaches in the English Department. He teaches both remedial and upper-level courses. His pedagogy emphasizes a student's intellectual commitment to the work at hand, and encourages students to recognize that there is more to learning than completing the assigned work. Professor Jorif is interested in the conflict the individual faces in American pluralistic society, especially in the United States during the 1850's.

**Gloria Shine McNamara** teaches in the Health Education Department. Ms. McNamara is a doctoral candidate at the CUNY Graduate Center, specializing in health behaviors and education. Ms. McNamara is a registered dietitian and NYS licensed nutritionist. She has taught graduate level clinical nutrition at Brooklyn College. Her previous work was in public health, as director of NYCDOH's Project LEAN, director of NYCDOH's Wellness at Work Program, and director of Maimonides Medical Center's WIC Program.

**Eric Metcalf** teaches in the Department of Speech, Communication, and Arts. His research has examined rhetorical dimensions of political campaigning and AIDS education. He has written and published (on compact disc) a study of Latin American and Caribbean literature. Currently he is working on a racially charged portrait of a century of American performing arts drawn from the lives of his family members.

**Elena Oumano** teaches Fundamentals of Speech in the Department of Speech, Theatre, and Communications. Among other things, she emphasizes outlining skills, which are important for developing better critical thinking, reading, writing, and note-taking skills. She is especially interested in strategies to defuse stage fright because effective oral presentations are crucial for success in any career.

**Mahatapa Palit** teaches in the Business Department. As a teacher of both Business Management and Marketing courses, she believes that in an increasingly competitive world both businesses as well as individuals will succeed through collaboration and providing more societal value. Her teaching as well as her scholarship focuses on ways of fostering collaborative learning across disciplines.

**Jean-Yves Plaisir** teaches in the Teacher Education Department's Bilingual Childhood program. His interests include Comparative and International Education, and Applied Linguistics with an emphasis on Education and Information Technology. He uses social constructivist theories to develop a research agenda that focuses on the socio-cultural adjustments of Caribbean immigrant children and families to the New York City public school system and beyond.

**Elizabeth Wissinger** teaches Introduction to Sociology and has interests in Popular Culture, Media Studies, and Urban Sociology. She enjoys democratizing the classroom, and often has student discussion leaders join her at the front of the class. She also makes frequent use of small group discussion, and includes a blackboard discussion component in every section. She especially appreciates it when students talk about what they really think about the issues and topics of the course, though sometimes it is difficult to achieve that level of trust in the classroom.

# CALL FOR PAPERS

*Inquirer* is a journal devoted to teaching and learning at BMCC. We welcome manuscripts on any number of topics, among them the following:

- successful or provocative classroom activities
- themes or units in your teaching
- use of technology or a new pedagogy
- ways you enliven the classroom
- the impact of syllabus or curriculum changes in the classroom
- writing or speaking across the curriculum in your classroom
- classroom-based research you've done
- balancing the curriculum issues: race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, environment
- teaching problems you've faced and resolved
- assessment and evaluation of students or of teachers
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Please submit a proposal for your article (a paragraph or two on one page) to the editors by January 15, 2008.

Submit an electronic copy of your completed computer-generated *Inquirer* article by March 1, 2008.

Manuscripts should not exceed 2500 words (or 8 pages) and must be double-spaced and in APA style.

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