

FROM THE CLASSROOM TO THE CONCOURSE: STUDYING THE GRAND CONCOURSE TO DISCOVER ONE'S COMMUNITY

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*"I Hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics—each one singing his, as it should be, blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his, as he measures his plank on beam,
The mason singing his, as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work...."*
from Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass

Walt Whitman's poem, "I Hear America Singing" inspired the 13 murals painted on the walls of the Grand Concourse U.S. post office located across the street from Hostos Community College. Visited last fall by Professor Zucker's Reading class (English 92) these looming murals helped students more fully appreciate how art enhances the Grand Concourse and, by extension, education illuminates everyday life. The 1860 poem itself celebrates America and its diversity, which 150 year later, still holds relevance for students.

The curriculum implemented in this class—one centered on both teaching and exploring the Grand Concourse—grew out of conversations held between the respective authors of this article: an Assistant Professor of English and an Archivist/Instruction Librarian. It took these English Reading students from vicarious to experiential learning (the former achieved by studying materials and the latter from observing the places studied): an orientation that enabled each of these types of learning to enhance the other. This approach can be seen as a paradigm of what can loosely be labeled a classroom without walls, and as such can be implemented as a pedagogical tool for a variety of disciplines.

English 92 is a developmental reading course structured to help students gain strategies for improving their reading comprehension and speed as well as for passing the CUNY/ACT exam. Students required to take this class often arrive feeling intimidated by the prospect of reading. Keeping this information in mind, the professor designed this reading class to help students connect what they were reading

to the world that surrounded them as a way of bringing the reading to life and life to the readings in order to enhance the learning of both content and reading skills.

The students began the unit by reading from a text about the Grand Concourse titled *Boulevard of Dreams* by Constance Rosenblum, focusing on subchapters from sections called “The Golden Ghetto” and “To Hell and Back” that explain the history, origins, socio-economic status and inhabitants of the boulevard. They were assigned this text, not only in celebration of the street’s centennial birthday, but because it was right outside the classroom window, allowing them to both observe the Concourse and phenomena they were reading about and gain cognizance that time and history have altered the environment.

Students learned that for generations of Jewish, Italian and Irish middle-class strivers this 182-wide tree-lined boulevard of dreams running from 138th Street to Mosholu Parkway represented success, and it existed as one of America’s best main streets. For other Bronx residents like Puerto Ricans and African-Americans, the 4.5 mile Concourse formed a concrete ribbon of racial and financial exclusion. Until the mid-1960s people of color could not rent an apartment on the Grand Concourse. When the Concourse is mentioned today it’s often the glory years that are spoken about, juxtaposed against 1970s deterioration, a downward slide which became apparent a decade earlier (Casari 5).

What happened? A combination of social causes, racial fear and media stories contributed to rapid changes. By the mid-1960s newspaper, television and later film portrayals like *Fort Apache The Bronx* showed how the Bronx changed demographically, crime increased, and eventually a *New York Times* story written by Martin Tolchin compared it to a third world jungle, written off by the rest of the city: “Even for a native New Yorker, the voyage across the Willis Avenue Bridge is a journey into a foreign country where fear is the overriding emotion in a landscape of despair” (63). On the heels of Robert Moses’ “slum clearance” and misguided 1950s urban planning decisions, devastating fires and building abandonment came to define the 1970s as landlords realized their properties were worth more for the assessed insurance value rather than relying on rent-controlled tenants. Burning buildings for the insurance money also relieved landlords of the responsibility in making repairs to aging structures that many tenants had stopped paying rent on due to lack of maintenance or financial hardship.

Themes of race and ethnicity played a strong role during this turbulent time in the Bronx and continue to do so today. Many of the residents leaving during the 1960s were white or white ethnics, and many of the newcomers were black, Latino or from other areas of the Caribbean. Many newcomers were much poorer and less educated than the previous residents. Steven V. Roberts of the *New York Times* highlighted these changes in an article spelling out the population shifts: “In the last decade, Negroes and Puerto Ricans have gradually moved north and west from the ghettos of the South Bronx and Morrisania, looking for better housing in the narrow, well-kept avenues parallel to the Concourse” (28).

During this transition the word “urban” became a code word for black and Latino inner city areas and is used today when describing central city neighborhoods. Integral to this Bronx tale is the history of immigration in America and what it meant to be a white-ethnic or a person of color in the Bronx mid-century and today (Casari 5).

Keeping these themes in mind set the tone for the 29 students in this class to consider what “place” Hostos Community College occupies along this well-known thoroughfare in efforts to harness this rich Bronx history and define their own place in the urban environment and the dreams they have for themselves and their futures.

In addition, *Boulevard of Dreams* and the other materials used, including three excerpts from Prof. Casari’s graduate thesis, *Concourse Dreams: a Bronx Neighborhood and Its Future* and a novel about life in an Hispanic neighborhood in New York called *Bodega Dreams* by Ernesto Quiñonez were approached in the context of their relation to the American Dream as represented in the stories of the streets like the one Hostos resides on, and those of East Harlem, the setting of *Bodega Dreams*. Presenting the unit in the framework of *The American Dream* made it accessible to all students, whose first assignment was to write what *The American Dream* meant to them and what they hoped to achieve (*The Dream* being one shared by Americans for a land that enables life to be better, richer and with opportunities for all of its inhabitants to fulfill their potential regardless of race, ethnicity or social stratum).

Furthermore, the American Dream itself was examined in the context of the different types of dreams one could have: conscious, unconscious, personal and collective, in order to help shed light on how significant and pervasive a role dreams can play in shaping our lives.

While reading about and reflecting upon the American Dream as manifested in New York, students employed many strategies designed to enhance reading comprehension. These strategies ranged from acquiring skills such as deciphering vocabulary from context clues and identifying main ideas, to the reader-response approach to texts, one in which students chose the aspects of the books that interested them and wrote, in letters to their classmates, their reflections upon them (Henry).

Beginning with a focus on the Grand Concourse, the final assignment linked the topic of ethnicity—which students studied as a factor shaping the evolution of the boulevard—with the *Book of the Semester: Listening is an Act of Love*, by David Isay. This book, which Professor Robert Cohen offered to all classes at Hostos as the heart of a project that included events such as a panel presentation, relays interviews given at StoryCorps, a non-profit organization that records oral histories of everyday people who exhibited extraordinary acts of courage.

Professor Casari visited the 92 Reading class on three occasions and facilitated the Grand Concourse exploration by presenting a set of neighborhood images culled from his graduate thesis *Concourse Dreams: A Bronx Neighborhood and Its Future* which put students in touch visually with the street right outside the Hostos Campus. Art Deco apartment houses, the Lorelei Fountain in Joyce Kilmer Park, Yankee Stadium, the Bronx County Building and other landmarks took on new resonance as students “connected the dots” between icons of past decades they were reading about and the fact that all of these landmarks are extant. At one point in the presentation two students made a connection between the new Bronx Terminal Market retail shops and the New Yankee Stadium when photographs of these sites were shown—they did not realize how close Hostos was to the new construction. During the slideshow Professor Zucker pointed out the window at the signage and market buildings so that students could see the structures from the classroom.

Students remarked in class and on homework about being surprised at the rich visual environment they weren't previously aware of: colored tile mosaics at the Fish Building on the Concourse, the murals at the Works Progress Administration (WPA) post office, the sculptural details on the Lorelai fountain and the many Art Deco apartment houses lining the Grand Concourse. Slowly students connected the past they had read about in *Boulevard of Dreams* with the present in which they lived, and were able to see their place in it from a new perspective beyond the campus walls. Most importantly anecdotal student feedback indicated they had become more aware of the built environment which reinforced aspects about the neighborhood fabric and history.

During one class visit Professor Casari distributed brochures from Tree Museum, a public art project by artist Katie Holten that features one minute recordings of various Bronx personalities and historians like Valerie Capers, Peter Derrick, Jazzy Jay and Adrian LeBlanc, among others. The brochure describes the genesis of the project: "The museum-without-walls runs the length of the Grand Concourse from 138th Street to Mosholu Parkway. Visitors can start their visit to the tree museum at any point on the Grand Concourse. Look for the sidewalk markers that identify trees with stories" (Holten).

Students from the 92 class and passersby simply dialed the tree museum number on their mobile phone and pressed the appropriate number for that tree's recording. In this way students became connected to that particular spot and whatever story the featured speaker had chosen to talk about like Bronx history or green roof technology on the Bronx County Building. According to feedback given to the professors, students took advantage of this on their own time and became aware of not only that physical spot but its place in Bronx history. Other students took advantage of dialing the numbers without being physically in front of the tree just to hear the speaker's take on that particular Grand Concourse location. Accessing the Tree Museum's recordings reinforced neighborhood history discussed in class and gave students a new perspective on "place" according to their comments.

The shift from classroom to the Concourse to community as a learning modality seemed to vitalize and enhance both the quality of learning and the experience of it. As we did not employ any controlled studies of this class, the implications are borne out from observations noted about both the work the students produced and the level of enthusiasm they exhibited. Furthermore, the class had a 58% ACT pass rate, approximately 15% higher than the Eng 92 pass norm that semester, according to the summary data for Spring 2009 and Fall 2009 exit tests (Hostos Office of Institutional Research). One student who passed the ACT exam was a multiple repeater and two more students missed passing the exam by one point. Although many factors influence the success and failure rates of exit exams, we hope that the interest sparked by these integrative approaches to reading contributed to the relatively high ACT pass rate.

An example that drew on these shifts is the term project assignment students constructed. Students were required to do research on an aspect of an ethnic group in New York with which they shared roots, and then fashion an interview from questions they created that touched upon their various ethnic and textual explorations. There were, inclusive of Professor Zucker's, 9 ethnicities in the class: Puerto Rican; Dominican; Mexican; Jamaican; Columbian; Haitian; Hong Kongian; Indi-

an and Russian. Creating interviews was an objective students were already primed to achieve; having identified types of questions asked in the book *Listening is an Act of Love*, and having worked in groups all term to create questions from materials covered in class. Group members then asked these sample questions to classmates in other groups to try them out in anticipation of the actual interview. Most students connected the theme they researched with the topics addressed in class.

What follows is an excerpt of an interview, one that conveyed the influence upon the student of the themes of both ethnicity and dreams:

- Student: What was the dream you had for yourself in coming to The United States?*
Aunt: To have a better life than I had in India.
Student: What did you dream when you slept?
Aunt: I dreamed my son would become a doctor.
Student: Did your dreams come true?
Aunt: Yes.
Student: What makes you laugh?
Aunt: When my husband walks in a sleep dream.
Student: How important are your dreams to you?
Aunt: I live for my dreams.
Student: My dreams are important to me, too. Do you like the American Dream?
Aunt: It's what I dreamed for all my life.

Some students predicated their questions on the type of queries offered in *Listening is an Act of Love*: The humanistic construction of this book—one revealing how love, compassion and forgiveness enable people to transcend formidable obstacles—did not pass the students by. It shaped their own interviews to take on a solicitous tone (which having gained awareness of what tone is and how it functions, helped them to control it). For instance, the conclusion of an interview in which a student learns about her Puerto Rican mother's marriage to her now deceased Columbian father ends on this note:

- Student: Are you happy now mami?*
Mother: Yes, I am. I have you and my granddaughters who each and every day makes my life full of joy and entertainment.
Student: Mami, thank you for always being there with me, helping me when I was going through a rough divorce and now for understanding that even though I can't be with you and my daughters 24/7. My thoughts are always with you.

Students often reflected, in their projects, on what they learned from their interviews. One student said of the interview he gave to his mother, which veered to her courtship with his father in Santo Domingo, "This is a story that makes me realize that maybe someday this can happen to me [as love and marriage.] For a love story I can say this is something that can be in a book.... When I grow old I will have a story for my kids for they can see what can happen with a simple hello."

Marked by precision, relevance and sympathy, the students' interviews were enhanced by the research they had done on both the Grand Concourse and the ethnic groups they identified themselves with, strengthening their schemas and their awareness of influences upon those groups.

This extending of the perimeters of the classroom exemplifies one of several strategies that facilitate learning for the net generation as defined in the text, *Educating the Net Generation*, edited by Diana G. Oblinger and James L. Oblinger (*An Educause Book*: 2005); another strategy used was giving students the opportunity to construct knowledge by incorporating new information into the paradigm the learner already has established.

Using the Grand Concourse centennial as the inspiration for the course helped collapse the academic institution into the surrounding milieu, enabling students to think more critically and contextually in their daily lives. In taking a journey from the classroom to the Concourse, they journeyed, as well, from passivity to active and animated learning and had fun along the way.

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