With this issue, our founding editor, Professor Gail Green-Anderson, will leave In Transit to devote her attention to new responsibilities as the Co-Director of Composition for the English department. Launched in 2005, In Transit reflects Gail’s tireless work to sustain its mission to provide a space for faculty to share ideas about classroom work. The In Transit team wishes to congratulate Professor Green-Anderson on her new position, and we extend our gratitude for all that she has accomplished in these pages. We will miss her editorial skills, energetic commitment to supporting writers, and laughter.

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Acknowledgements

In Transit is an in-house publication. Its mission is to publish works-in-progress on classroom practice and the scholarship of teaching and learning, educational policy and philosophy, and short reviews of works related to the classroom.

The papers presented in the current volume are offered by the authors and editors to our peers at LaGuardia Community College for critique and commentary. In preparation for external, refereed publication, works-in-progress will be revised, often in the Faculty Workshop on Scholarship and Publication, a professional development seminar facilitated by faculty for faculty engaged in scholarship. Of the contributors to this volume, several have participated in the Carnegie Seminar on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and we are grateful for their contributions, in the Seminar and in these pages, to the awareness of teaching as acts of intellect, art, and justice.

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We are pleased to acknowledge the Visible Knowledge Project and its director, Professor Randy Bass of Georgetown University, for providing the funding that permitted the initiation of *In Transit*. We are most grateful to President Gail O. Mellow of LaGuardia Community College for her leadership in recognizing the value of the scholarship of teaching and learning and for providing crucial funds needed to sustain *In Transit*.

Center for Teaching and Learning, LaGuardia Community College (City University of New York)  
http://www.lagcc.cuny.edu/ctl
Syllabus

Would you consider this
a hard workout? Plastic
shadows. Stealth charmer. Insects
are fond of the
encyclopedia (pages). A responsible
excuse list is circulating.

We can play him,
and he won’t know. What a nurse
needs to know an
accountant needs? The machine
tells you if something
has to be done.
No, don’t pay attention;
you must remain unmoved
to stay on top.
Disbelief seduces. Vigor united with prejudice. Distraction

flowers. When brown rice
is available, why fill
up on white? Next,
charm but authority: “Oh,
by the by, you
have to test.” A
chance to rage less,
be of desire curious. There is no

plan to move the
library. I shan’t crucify
you; it’s not in
vogue. What I don’t
know is perennial as
a stamp. Balanced, perhaps,
on the tip of
an aside, a small classic might be
opening. When you hear
or see or smell
it, you intuit, finally,
who. Together is often
how. That raises the

quality of our current –
today. This could be
the song that keeps her on the bridge.

Thomas Fink
Introduction

Rosemary A. Talmadge, Office of the President

If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve (or save) the world and a desire to enjoy (or savor) the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.

E. B. White

It is early fall in North Salem and I am at my desk watching little birds land on the forsythia bush near my window to await their turns at the feeder stationed in the middle of the yard. Usually they come back to the branches, as one is doing now, to eat their nut or seed. Earlier a sparrow alighted and, for no apparent reason, broke into song, pausing between each riff as he waited for the melody to be echoed by his partner across the way. I could not help but think of the poet Mary Oliver’s poem, “How Everything Adores Being Alive.” In truth, while writing this essay, I have spent many hours appreciating the world outside my window – its beauty and fragility.

As I thought about the natural world and our relationship to it, I turned to the literature on sustainability and mindfulness, drew mind maps and Venn diagrams, and thought about why the editors of In Transit may have joined these two topics. Teasing out the complexities in the relationship between mindfulness and sustainability, I have reflected, too, on the connections among these concepts, our campus, and my own life. But in the middle of this cloudy morning, the sun has reappeared, interrupting my reveries and revealing the tiny pink and green leaves of the low bushes along the stone wall, and drawing my attention back to the story I want to tell.

The significance of sustainability consciousness conveyed by In Transit’s call is central to the current debate about the proper role of education in creating a just and sustainable world. Bringing together the concepts of sustainability and mindfulness, the editors signal a conversation not just about widening sustainable practices on campus or increasing students’ awareness of environmental issues, though these are important pieces. Nor does the conversation center only on peda-
gogy and curricula, though these, too, are essential elements. Rather, by linking sustainability with mindfulness, the editors invite us to embark on an even deeper discussion with far-reaching implications for our forty-year-old institution – and for the larger world of which we are a small part. It is a conversation that includes not only ecological awareness, sustainable practices, environmental curricula, and pedagogy, but also current thinking about such topics as ecojustice, intergenerational stewardship, contemplative education, and planetary consciousness. This volume of *In Transit* makes room for two significant concepts now under discussion among scholars in the sustainability conversation: the need for a paradigm shift in our thinking about ecological intelligence in higher education, and sustained attention to the inner work required for this shift to take place.

To set our work here in a slightly broader context, it is important to recognize that the current sustainability movement in our country is now almost fifty years old. In 1962, marine biologist and nature writer Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, an investigation of the long term consequences of pesticides for our habitat. Eight years later, in 1970, Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson organized the first Earth Day as an environmental teach-in; and the following two years saw the publication of *Diet for a Small Planet* (1971), by writer and activist Frances Moore Lappé, and *Limits to Growth* (1972), by environmental scientist and activist Donella Meadows. It has been said that students now entering college – and, we could add, many of LaGuardia’s faculty and staff – went to high school at a time when Earth Day celebrations and recycling activities were already commonplace.

Nevertheless, LaGuardia’s first and second College-wide vision summits (2001 and 2005) did not address the College’s role in sustainability. Concerns about sustainability were central, however, in discussions at the 2009 summit, where “Leadership for a Sustainable World” emerged as one of four themes to guide the College’s future planning (LaGuardia). Some might say that the 230 summit participants took inspiration from the beautiful setting – a glass-walled conservatory in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. But to me the foregrounding of sustainability at the summit reflected a quiet and steadily growing sustainability movement on campus – in our physical space, in the classroom, in extracurricular activities, and, increasingly, in collaboration with our community. A few examples are highlighted below.
In our physical space, serious efforts to reduce the College’s carbon footprint are underway. By 2008, the College had reduced annual energy consumption by 1.2 million kilowatt hours, recycled 15% of accumulated garbage, saved 4 million gallons of water, and reduced nonflammable hazardous waste by 37%. These impressive accomplishments and others earned LaGuardia CUNY’s first-ever sustainability award (“2008 CUNY Sustainability”).

In credit and noncredit programs, a greening of the curricula is reflected in a variety of programs such as the Mathematics, Engineering and Computer Science department’s contextualized mathematics courses (Project Quantum Leap); Health Sciences’ Dietetic Technician Program which, in partnership with the Cornell University Cooperative Extension Agricultural Program, offers students service learning at local farmers markets (Ippolito); and Natural Sciences’ new major in Environmental Science (“Environmental Science”). In addition, NY Designs offers sustainable design programs (NY Designs), and the Division of Adult and Continuing Education provides training programs for green jobs (Moon). In 2007 and 2010, the Common Reading Committee selected Al Gore’s An Inconvenient Truth and Eric Schlosser’s Fast Food Nation, respectively.

Across campus, commitment to green values is increasingly evident. An Environmental Club has been established, and Green celebrations are now regular events; the Spring 2011 semester will extend Green Day to Green Week to deepen awareness and showcase accomplishments. Opening Sessions programs have also highlighted the ecology movement with Going Green: Responding to the Ecological Crisis (2007), and Food for Thought: Strategies for Educating a Sustainable Community (2010). In 2009, Live Wire devoted a special issue to sustainability initiatives (“Leadership”).

Beyond our campus is a wealth of expertise and inspiration from which we have drawn. Additional connections to the wider community include faculty-led student work with the Newtown Creek (Balavender) and the Environmental Asthma Assessment and Prevention project (Asthma). Speakers invited to LaGuardia include Majora Carter of Sustainable South Bronx, Erik Baard of the Long Island City Community Boathouse, Anna Lappé of the Small Planet Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Dr. Debra Rowe, a national authority on the integration of sustainability into educational curricula. In 2007, Peter
Singer, Ira W. Decamp Professor of Bioethics in the University Center for Human Values at Princeton, visited LaGuardia to discuss the ethical implications of carbon fuel dependency with students, faculty, and staff.

LaGuardia’s initiatives mirror a growing commitment to sustainability in community colleges throughout the nation. The October/November 2010 issue of Community College Journal, published by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), explores the ways community colleges are putting sustainability education into practice. It highlights the work of several leading colleges including Butte College in Northern California, which generates more solar power than any other community college in the country; Hayward Community College in North Carolina which incorporates elements of sustainability in more than fifty courses; and Cape Cod Community College in Massachusetts, which received funding to clean up pollution from jet fuel in eastern Cape Cod and has created an environmental technology program (Orr, Andrea). The journal also describes a Sustainability Task Force formed last year by AACC to help colleges reduce waste, preserve resources, and prepare students for jobs at all levels of the green economy (“SEED”).

Taken together, LaGuardia’s efforts, and those of its community college colleagues, represent many of the “right actions” of educational institutions committed to leading sustainability education: building awareness and knowledge, promoting personal and institutional sustainable practices, and greening the curricula. Increasingly prevalent, however, is the view that such approaches are not comprehensive enough. Urging educators and their institutions to play an even stronger role in preparing graduates to tackle the problems that face our planet, some scholars stress that we must change the way we think about sustainability education and cultivate mindfulness in ourselves and our students.

Changing the Way We Think

Scholars advocating a change in thinking about sustainability education tend to frame the solution as requiring a paradigm shift, a dramatic change in focus, and a greater capacity for systems thinking. Viewed from this perspective, educational institutions too often treat sustainability superficially, as an addition to curricula, programming, or practice (Nolet; Morito). Philosopher Bruce Morito, whose work
was introduced to many at LaGuardia by our colleague Terence Julien, shares this concern about ecology as “an add-on to the more primary scientific disciplines (especially biology)” (1). He believes that our increasing detachment from the earth and from those affected by our current environmental problems has led to thinking about ecology when we should be “thinking ecologically” (9).

Some theorists take the “thinking ecologically” argument further, contending that sustainability should be the central focus of all educational endeavors – the defining point around which to organize all other values and actions (Orr, David, Earth; O’Sullivan; Nolet). Describing what they see as an ecological crisis of planetary proportions, they urge revolutionary solutions. Educator Victor Nolet, addressing the preparation of sustainability-literate teachers, calls for a “reorientation of all education systems” (419). Similarly, Edmund O’Sullivan, Professor of Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and Director of its Transformative Learning Centre at the University of Toronto, asserts that “the fundamental educational task of our times is to make the choice for a sustainable planetary habitat of interdependent life forms over and against the pathos of the global competitive marketplace” (163). Inspired by theologian Thomas Berry’s call for teaching students the story of the universe (Dream), O’Sullivan argues that for the first time in our history human beings do not have a planetary consciousness. He maintains that “the University should be a place where the universe story is encountered and engaged” (168).

For guidance in re-imagining the relationship between human beings and the earth, O’Sullivan and others turn to the United Nation’s Earth Charter (O’Sullivan 170–80), the product of “a ten-year, world-wide, cross-cultural dialogue on common goals and shared values” (Rockefeller 3). As described by nature writer and activist Terry Tempest Williams, the Charter is “a visionary document that creates a template for ecological consciousness around the world, rooted in local actions. It asks us to embrace the planet while taking care of our own backyards” (Williams xiii). Seeing global consequences in local actions and granting importance to place are prominent themes in sustainability education literature. David Orr, Paul Sears Distinguished Professor of Environmental Studies and Politics at Oberlin College, writes: “I doubt that we can ever come to love the planet as some claim to do, but I know we can learn to love particular places. . . . far from being a quaint
relic of a bygone age, the love of place . . . will prove to be essential to a decent future” (“Recollection” 103).

Advocates of radical approaches to sustainability increasingly engage strategies of systems thinking, a methodology that emphasizes pattern over content and the whole system over an analysis of the parts (Meadows, “Dancing”; Senge et al., Necessary; Nolet). Many in my field of organizational development learned about systems thinking from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) scientist and management theorist Peter Senge, who introduced this concept into organizational practice with his book, The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization. But the roots of system thinking actually reach down into the natural sciences and the work of biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, who, in 1925, made general systems theory the subject of his doctoral thesis. Many scholars from a host of disciplines and nations have contributed to systems thinking, among them social psychologist Kurt Lewin, computer scientist Jay Forrester, mathematician Norbert Weiner, biologist and philosopher Humberto Maturana, cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead, and physicist Fritjof Capra. Applying systems thinking to sustainability, Nolet points to “not only the ecological relationships among species and nature, but also the inextricable links among ecological, economic and social systems” (Nolet, 423). He and others believe that a greater capacity for systems thinking could deepen our understanding of sustainability.

Senge observes that “more and more people are beginning to sense that the mounting sustainability crises are interconnected – symptoms of a larger global system that is out of balance . . . the result of a way of thinking whose time has passed” (Necessary 6–7). A Senior Lecturer at MIT, Senge has turned his attention to developing the SoL Sustainability Consortium, a nonprofit community committed to providing “a starting place and support for those who want to begin the process of educating, illuminating and shifting their organizations toward renewal, regeneration and nourishment of natural systems, communities and the financial bottom line” (SoL).

Creating a mental capacity for systems thinking by studying natural systems is advocated by artists as well. For example, the celebrated American poet and translator Robert Haas is founder of River of Words, a California-based program through which students from around the world study local systems of watersheds and reflect on their
learning experience in poems. “Combining sciences and the arts makes pedagogical sense,” writes Pamela Michael, Director of River of Words, as “[b]oth disciplines rely on observation, pattern recognition, problem solving, experimentation and thinking by analogy” (Michael 116). The application of systems thinking to sustainability challenges all of us – scientists and artists, faculty, staff, and administrators – to re-envision the interdependence of our roles, to see across boundaries, and to link the current ecological crisis to broader social issues of global economics and social justice. It requires that we face present environmental challenges holistically and, finally, that we imagine the needs of future generations responsibly and generously.

As we take up these challenges, we may want to heed educational philosopher Maxine Greene’s distinction between “seeing small” and “seeing big” (9–10). Greene warns that, asked to assume “the perspective of a system,” educators may see “only trends and tendencies rather than the intentionality and concreteness of everyday life” (10). Interestingly, she refers to the ability to see large systems and structures as “seeing small” (11). “The challenge” writes Greene, “may be to learn how to move back and forth, to comprehend the domains of policy and long-term planning while also attending to particular [students], the unmeasurable, and the unique” (11). For Greene, attention to the particular is “seeing big” and learning to balance these two frames might help us discover new ways to approach sustainability education.

Cultivating Mindfulness

Along with systems thinking, education scholars are also exploring the place of mindfulness in education (Hart, “Interiority”; Hart, “Opening”). Though there is a tendency to equate mindfulness with formal contemplative practices, the concept of mindfulness is, increasingly, a reference point for disciplinary approaches that range from the natural sciences, allied health, social sciences, and psychology to philosophy and, of course, education. Tobin Hart views mindfulness in the classroom as contemplation, a “third way of knowing” that “affects student performance, character, and depth of understanding” and “complements the rational and the sensory” (“Opening” 29). The study of mindfulness has also been advanced by psychologist Ellen J. Langer, for whom mindfulness is “a state of alertness and lively awareness expressed in active information processing [which] may be seen,” she
writes, “as creating (noticing) multiple perspectives or being aware of
context” (138–139).

Though not always explicitly linked to sustainability, mindfulness – variously referred to as contemplation, reflection, attunement, consciousness, deep listening, and presence – has found its way into sustainability discourse (O’Sullivan; Senge et al., Necessary; Amel, Manning, and Scott). In this context, cultivating mindfulness allows us to heighten our awareness and connection to the natural world and to others, something ecopsychologists believe is “essential to mental and, thus, ecological health” (Amel, Manning, and Scott 14). More mindful of the world around us, we will be more inclined, perhaps, to see our part in taking care of it and more committed to taking action. “A deep connection to the natural world,” argue Amel, Manning and Scott, “will make sustainable choices seem more critical and thus hard to ignore” (22). In a study of levels of commitment among environmental activists, researchers found that many activists were originally inspired by profound experiences in nature, and that they had sustained commitment to their work by developing “a kind of contemplative attitude, a letting go, listening deeply to their being in the world and seeing what has previously been unseen and unknown” (Kovan and Dirkx 115).

Practices for cultivating mindfulness or attentiveness may take many forms: meditation, for example, or writing, running, and yoga. My first teacher of mindfulness was my father, whose instruction might have some bearing on my discussion of systems thinking and mindfulness. One of eleven children, my father was a city kid who left high school at seventeen to join the Marine Corps. When I was six, we moved to a dreary, brick apartment complex in Norfolk, Virginia, near the back gate of the naval base where he was stationed, and it was there that my awareness of ecology began. One day while browsing in the PX, my father came upon and bought a set of The Bedtime Story-Books by conservationist and author of children’s stories, Thornton W. Burgess. Our small apartment became a kind of mindfulness boot camp as each night after dinner, while my mother washed the dishes, my father read to us from these books. My younger sister and I came to love the animals of Burgess’s Mother West Wind worrying every time Farmer Brown’s mindless son threatened the tranquility of their lives in the Great Forest.
My father had little first-hand experience with the wonders of the natural world, but he soon became a master at introducing them to us. Fastening a string of seed on the concrete sill, he drew a flock of birds to our bedroom window. Delighted with this success, he brought us a field guide to identify them and he taught my sister and me to sit quietly to observe them and learn their calls. One day, we found a nest and in it a perfect blue egg which we presented to our father. He was less happy with our gift than we had hoped. Surprised, we offered to return the egg, but he patiently explained that it was not possible to undo the damage we had done. Without training or experience, my father was teaching us the principles of thinking ecologically: to be mindful of our connection to the natural world, to know that we are a part of something larger than ourselves, and to understand the consequences of our actions on the world around us.

In more formal learning spaces, the direct benefits of mindfulness practice for student learning have been well-documented (Hart, “Interiority”). Influential in promoting mindfulness practices in the classroom, Hart points to extensive research that demonstrates the positive effects of contemplative practice, for example, “improved concentration, empathy, perceptual acuity, a drop in anxiety and stress symptoms, and more effective performance in a broad range of domains from sports to academic test taking to creativity” (“Opening” 31). The studies referred to by Hart have found that contemplative practices result in physiological changes that improve student performance on cognitive tasks. Building on this research, LaGuardia is preparing to test the applicability of mindfulness interventions in the classroom. Under the leadership of Dean Paul Arcario, Professor Les Gallo-Silver of the Human Services program and Professor Nurper Gokhan of Social Science are developing short modules on mindfulness for classroom use.

However, mindfulness has not come easily to the academy. Describing how he came to define attunement as an antidote for our detachment from the natural world, philosopher Bruce Morito notes that he struggled with a tension between his respect for the rules of logic and his intuitive knowledge about consciousness gained through his experiences with indigenous peoples and with the inner city children he accompanies on trips into the wilderness. Such experiences, explains Moritio, created in him “an immediate awareness of the healing power of the land” that eventually informed his scholarship (3).
That it has taken so long for mindfulness to become a credible topic in education reflects the long-held Cartesian split between mind and body that guided the industrial era: the rational was more highly prized than intuition or insight, and technological advances edged out time-tested wisdom and practices of indigenous peoples. As neuroscientist and dancer Adele Diamond laments, “Science may have defined life too small.” Ironically, however, we may credit technology’s capacity to measure impacts on the mind and body with the growing acceptance of contemplative practices as worthy subjects for scholarship and practice in education.

In closing, I join with those who believe that the next frontier in sustainability – what the editors call “sustainability consciousness” – will require an inner journey (Orr, David, *Earth*; O’Sullivan; Senge et al., *Presence*). Senge and his colleagues call attention to explorer and environmental scientist John Milton for whom “political, legal, and economic approaches don’t go deep enough.” Like many scholars, practitioners, and activists, Milton is “convinced that the next great opening of an ecological worldview will have to be an internal one” (55). Senge, Milton, and others explored in this introduction also resist the notion that technology alone can lead us out of our planetary crisis. In my view, the stress on inner work must be matched with a greater capacity to detect underlying structures and systems, an inquiry appropriate for teachers and learners. Indeed, the scholars in these conversations urge educators and their institutions to assume a more prominent role in the future – a view the theologian Thomas Berry expressed in this way:

> The universities should also have the critical capacity, the influence over the other professions and the other activities of society. In a special manner the universities have the contact with the younger generation needed to reorient the human community toward a greater awareness that the human exists, survives, and becomes whole within the single great community of the planet Earth. (*Great* 80)

Calling for changes in the way we think about the world and our place in it, and supporting the cultivation of mindfulness, these scholars offer useful direction for a campus that has set for itself the ambitious goal of providing “leadership for a sustainable future.”
The editors of *In Transit* invite us all into an essential conversation, one that has the potential to extend our work and our thinking in new and exciting ways. I am grateful for this opportunity to introduce the work of this issue’s thirteen authors, each of whom suggests a “reorientation of the human community” and reflects a unique disciplinary perspective, passion, and the desire to make a difference in our little part of the planet.

Looking up from my computer, I see that in the time I have been writing, most of the orange and gold leaves have fallen from the tall oaks and the maples, leaving a deep new carpet of brown on the slope leading down to the meadow. Already red berries appear on the rambling burning bush. Dusk is descending, and two deer pause where the lawn meets the trees and turn their heads to look back at me. I hold still and they return my gaze, delaying for a moment their leap over the fallen log and into the woods. Switching off the lamp, I watch the place where the deer have disappeared until the daylight fades and the shadows settle into the remaining spaces between the darkening trees.

**Notes**


**Works Consulted**


Introduction
One hazy July afternoon in the summer of 2009, five high school students from the LaGuardia Youth Center for Engineering Excellence (LYCEE) gathered in LaGuardia’s courtyard to explore the possibilities of charging an iPod with miniature solar panels, one of many activities in the comprehensive five-week course. There was just enough natural light to power the device and convince the young women of the sun’s value as a source of energy. Days later, back in the courtyard as contestants in the program’s science competition, they converted the moving air of a fan and a wind turbine, and the heat of a high intensity lamp into the energy needed to run electric toy cars and airplanes. Members of LaGuardia’s engineering faculty looked on as judges of the competition. The students performed five experiments, arguing as they went along for the use of sun and wind as alternatives to burning fossil fuels to generate electricity. For their efforts, the team won first prize.

As the students’ experiments suggest, a fundamental principle of sustainability is that natural and renewable resources yield cleaner, more efficient, and less harmful forms of energy. Put simply, the practice of sustainability means doing more with less, a philosophy expressed by Mayor Michael Bloomberg when, on April 22, 2007, he recognized the significance of Earth Day with the release of PlaNYC. A ten-year comprehensive program and the first of its kind in the city’s history, the goal of Bloomberg’s “30 in 10” plan is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by thirty percent and thus improve the quality of New York’s land, water, air, and transportation (“PlaNYC”). Two months after Bloomberg’s announcement, Chancellor Matthew Goldstein took up the challenge and publicly committed CUNY’s twenty-three senior and junior campuses and institutions to PlaNYC (CUNY).
The Chancellor’s directives were clear. Through the formation of Sustainability Councils on every CUNY campus, all senior and two-year institutions would prepare and implement a ten-year sustainability plan. Free to tailor strategies to individual needs and resources, each campus would commit to making measurable progress toward sustainable solutions in seven key “pillars.” Energy, water, transportation, recycling, procurement, dining and nutrition, and outreach and education were targeted for development of environmental awareness (“What Is BC Doing?”). Sustainable CUNY/Sustainable New York would also support academic research and, in partnership with civic and business leaders, promote economic development opportunities (“Sustainable”).

To secure commitment to PlaNYC across the University’s 23 institutions, Allan Dobrin, Executive Vice Chancellor and Chief Operating Officer, charged the CUNY Task Force on Sustainability to direct each institution in the creation of unique and measurable ten-year plans (“CUNY”). In turn, each institution would designate a chairperson to carry out the College’s portion of the challenge. Instituted in fall 2007 and coordinated by Shahir Erfan, Executive Director of Facilities and Planning, LaGuardia’s Sustainability Council began to meet quarterly. Over thirty faculty, staff, and student representatives were brought together to, in Erfan’s words, “implement new measures, to reduce LaGuardia’s carbon footprint, and to raise awareness” (Erfan).

LaGuardia’s Sustainability Council members share passion for reducing harmful greenhouse gas emissions, increasing campus awareness of the meaning of sustainability, and communicating the knowledge that sustainability is both feasible and affordable. However, realizing sustainable objectives for each “pillar” has not been without challenges. This paper presents several of these challenges, the results of limited resources and the institutional fragmentation characteristic of our large two-year urban commuter college. Despite challenges, the Sustainability Council has made incremental but decisive progress in designing initiatives that address the seven pillars. Described here are initiatives implemented in four of these – energy, recycling, nutrition, and student outreach and education. We conclude with recommendations for spurring sustainable practices that can be realized, we argue, by focusing strategically on educational outreach and several key elements of our physical environment.
Birth of the Sustainability Movement

The origins of sustainability are rooted in the Green Revolution of the mid-20th century, a period of innovation in research, development, and technology. Between the mid-1940s and the late 1970s, facing impending famine across the continents of India and Africa, agronomists sought methods to maximize agricultural production (Cleaver 177–79). However, the unforeseen hazards of industrialized agriculture included devastating effects on the environment such as the rapid loss of freshwater resources. The mass agricultural production programs credited with stabilizing international food security were at the same time creating a poisonous reliance on the fossil fuels from which virtually all synthetic fertilizers, pest removers, and herbicides are derived. By the late 1950s, the reliance on petrochemicals in the United States and the subsequent contamination of water supplies by agricultural processes was at an all-time high. Advocates for the environmental movement, among them Rachel Carson, author of Silent Spring, established a correlation between pesticides and cancer rates that greatly supported a need for action.

Formed in 1967, the Environmental Defense Fund served as a pivotal force in the crusade against the use of DDT and other harmful “biocides” in agriculture, successfully calling for a complete phase-out of non-emergency use of these chemicals. However, until 1970, the needs of the natural environment were routinely superseded by agribusiness, an inequity perpetuated by the US Department of Agriculture which oversaw the growth of the agricultural industry as well as the enforcement of environmental regulations. The founding of the Environmental Protection Agency under the Nixon Administration brought to an official end a major conflict of interest between environmental regulations and big agri-business (Wisman).

In 1987, the Brundtland Commission of the United Nations articulated the widely accepted definition of sustainability as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World par. 27). By 1990, Earth Day had become an international event, and is now celebrated in 175 nations. While maintaining a focus on environmental stewardship, the concept of sustainability has evolved to encompass economic and sociopolitical principles and refers variously to all aspects of daily experience from urban design, environmental ethics, and agricultural
techniques to personal and ethical philosophies that encompass food choice, health, and spirituality (Milne, Kearins, and Walton).

The Challenges of Allocation, Location, and Communication
Guided by the common goals and objectives expressed by the Brundtland Commission, the sustainability movement is committed to lessening humanity’s negative impact on the environment (Brundtland). College campuses across the country have responded to the movement’s call to action in a variety of ways and with varying degrees of success. Those campuses advantaged by endowment and location have implemented sustainability in admirable ways. Butte Community College in Oroville, California generates enough solar power on site to support 500 homes (“Butte”). Chicago’s DePaul University was awarded a Gold Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certificate for the construction of its $40 million Monsignor Andrew J. McGowan Science Building; among its impressive sustainable features are a partial green roof and a storm water management system (“Report Card 2011: DePaul”). In New York City, St John’s University’s 1,500-square-foot organic garden serves as a site for student-oriented environmental and sustainability activities (“Report Card 2011: St. John’s”), while Yale University dining practices feature local and organic produce and hormone free meat (“Report Card 2011: Yale”).

But other colleges, many of them members of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), point to challenges of limited staff, limited resources, and competing university priorities (“Sustainable”). At LaGuardia, implementation of sustainability measures is severely hindered by constraints imposed by budget, location, and outreach. Although mandated by CUNY, the Council’s “30 in 10” project has no operating budget, nor does LaGuardia have a budget line item for sustainability efforts. Instead, the Council must rely on grants and on individual divisions or departments to propose and fund initiatives. Effective sustainability measures require the shared understanding and acceptance that monetary investments do not always yield results in the short term. With an average return on investment of somewhere between ten to twenty years (Jolicoeur and Kahl 1), many sustainability projects risk being considered low priority by the college leadership. Replacing existing urinals, for example, with waterless pint urinals takes time and resources from new academic pro-
grams, courses, professional development, and retention and pass rate initiatives. Facility-related projects such as parking lots, classrooms, faculty offices, and the library are priorities that take precedence over large-scale sustainability projects like LEED buildings.

Committed to the principles of sustainability but confronted with budgetary constraints, the college wrestles with conflicting demands: a new faculty research lab or an emission-reducing lighting system in the E building atrium that shuts off automatically on sunny days? Should a campus invest its limited funds in solar panels when conventional – though inefficient – electrical and heating systems that generate air pollutants and carbon dioxide appear to work well enough? Should we consider costly reconstruction of the C Building in order to plant roof gardens?

Other questions concern campus culture, disposition, and the communication of a coherent message necessary to changing behavior at a two-year commuter college. Will students and staff walk an additional twenty yards to toss their aluminum cans into a recycling bin? Will faculty accustomed to printing thirty hard copies for class assignments direct students to access these through electronic resources? Can we grow green oases for study and reflection in our urban environment, creating, for example, small fruit, vegetable, and flower gardens in the college’s concrete spaces? Indeed, an equally demanding challenge is posed by the very location and character of our commuter campus. Housed in former factories facing wide boulevards that intersect with major subway and train lines, the campus lacks utilizable open space and, except for a small, well-manicured courtyard, offers little greenery. Living, working, and learning in a major city can be overwhelming, especially for students who are accustomed to a slower or more rural life. In extreme cases, they may even experience what has been recently termed “nature deficit disorder.” As described by Richard Louv, NDD is caused by disconnection from nature and restriction of outdoor life and its consequences can be severe, including “attention problems, obesity, anxiety, and depression” (Sorrentino).

Another challenge confronting the LaGuardia Sustainability Council is the fragmentation of communication among our population of fifty thousand nonresidential credit and noncredit students. Like many currently enrolled in urban public colleges, LaGuardia’s commuter students are preoccupied with the demands of balancing school, work,
and family lives. For this population, sustainability refers primarily to conserving the energy necessary to managing life’s exigencies. Few of these students have expressed interest in emission reduction, or in activities such as gardening, composting, or waste management. If the dormitories and built environment of a residential campus offer the sense of community that encourages cohesive and direct contact with students, a campus whose backbone is the MTA has fewer options for communicating the personal, social and philosophical benefits of sustainability. Nevertheless, for most of our students, LaGuardia is the hub not only of their academic learning experience, but of their core personal development as well. It is imperative, therefore, that students, as well as faculty and staff, experience sustainable energy solutions in ways that they can see, touch, taste, hear, and make use of in the places on campus where they learn, study, work, eat, and congregate.

Approaches and Solutions to Energy Reduction

Recycling

Aware of the slim chances of acquiring big ticket symbols of sustainability comparable to Butte’s solar panels, St. John’s green roofs, or Yale’s hormone-free menu, LaGuardia’s Sustainability Council has confronted the problem of carbon emissions by making smaller, budget-conscious changes to reduce waste streams across the campus. Some of these efforts are visible in every part of the college: annual Earth Day celebrations, solar faucets in the bathrooms, Styrofoam-free cafeterias, healthier choices in the vending machines and cafeterias, recycling bins in the hallways, and individually operated “Big Belly” solar trash compactors in the courtyards. LaGuardia engages in regular recycling of bottles, cans, paper, cardboard, scrap metal, electronics, and even laboratory chemicals. Starting in 2009, printer cartridges and rechargeable batteries have been collected for recycling. In June 2008, LaGuardia joined forces with the Doe Fund’s “Ready, Willing and Able” (RWA) initiative, a resource recovery program dedicated to the “provision of jobs for homeless or previously incarcerated (non-violent) individuals … and resource conservation” (RWA). Every two to four weeks, the RWA team picks up, transports, and converts 70 gallons of the cafeteria’s used cooking oil into biodiesel fuel. Supported by the Doe Fund, the RWA program is credited with converting over 1.7 million gallons of waste oil into clean burning alternative fuel (RWA).
A second energy conservation solution targeted the college’s 35 vending machines. In the past, these remained on 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, in a continuous cycle of consuming and wasting energy. Recently, these models have been removed and replaced by ENERGY STAR® machines, some of which power down when idle for long periods. Overconsumption of energy is a general problem of city buildings whose electric, oil, and gas usage make up to forty percent of America’s carbon emissions (Patrick 37). One Sustainability Council efficiency effort is LaGuardia’s participation in the NYC CoolRoofs Project, an affordable energy reducing solution that cuts cooling costs and carbon emissions through the application of a reflective white coating to a roof’s surface. In spring 2010, dozens of students and local volunteers turned out to paint the roof of the C Building in a demonstration of community and college collaboration that supports PlanNYC (“Buildings”).

Nutrition
The nation’s consumption of fossil fuel as a result of food production and distribution is tremendous. According to Dale Allen Pfeiffer, consumption has increased “20-fold in the last 4 decades” and Americans “consume 20 to 30 times more fossil fuel energy per capita than people in developing nations. Agriculture directly accounts for 17% of all the energy used in this country,” a number that continues to climb (Pfeiffer). Processing, packaging, refrigerating, and transporting require massive inputs of energy, very little of which is renewable. Conservative estimates claim that it takes an average of seven to ten calories of carbon-derived energy to produce one calorie of food, a disproportion that increases up the food chain (“Fossil”). Indeed, the caloric input/output ratio of grain-fed beef can reach 35:1, a ratio that does not account for fuel consumed in transportation (“Fossil”). Therefore, one campus-wide “30 in 10” strategy is directed at reducing fossil fuel consumption which, in turn, contributes to improved health and eating habits of students, staff, and faculty.

Driven by the carbon reduction initiative, the cafeteria menu now includes vegetarian dishes and fresh salads along with more traditional meat selections. In addition, campus vending machines provide healthier snacks marked by a “fit pick” sticker – trail mixes, for example, fruits snacks, nutrition bars, and vegetable chips, all containing less fat,
saturated fat, and sugar. Finally, at the kiosks in the C and E Buildings, students can choose from a selection of fresh fruits and low-sugar juices, all of which support personal wellbeing, healthier eating habits, and a carbon-friendlier diet.

**Outreach and Education**

Partnering with faculty to transmit ideas about sustainability, the Council has worked hard over the past three years to integrate its concepts and practices into credit and noncredit courses wherever possible. In April 2010, the Council arranged for LaGuardia’s facilities personnel to take physics students to tour the college’s heat, ventilation, and air conditioning systems. During the tour, students and staff discussed the ways more cost-effective measures, such as a new energy management system and low-flow faucets, have reduced college energy consumption by over 1.2 million kilowatt hours and water usage by 4 million gallons. Students asked questions, evaluated theories, and discussed obstacles. “In the classroom,” observed Physics Professor Frank Wang of the Mathematics, Engineering, and Computer Science department (MEC), “topics are mostly abstract, but the tours localized concepts, connecting what students learn to potential career objectives…help[ing] students apply what they learn in textbooks to how a boiler functions.”

A second example of faculty involvement is Project Quantum Leap (PQL), a collaboration between MEC and the LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning that has successfully integrated a problem-solving approach to energy consumption into the teaching and learning of developmental math (“Project”). Third, in Fall 2010, in alignment with the 10-year Sustainability Plan’s education initiative, the Natural Sciences department introduced its Environmental Science major (“Environmental”). Additionally, in conjunction with the Newtown Creek Alliance, Natural Sciences faculty and students are engaged in the Newtown Creek Water Monitoring Project, a research project designed to assess and restore the viability of Newtown Creek (Newtown Creek Alliance). An active waterway running between Brooklyn and Queens, the Creek’s pollution affects the entire watershed and local population. In the words of student Kitami Elmsox, “a lot of work [remains] to be done to clean up Newtown Creek, and ultimately the East river . . . working on this project has made me be more conscious
of environmental issues in general, and now I would like to pursue a career in that area."

Other examples of increased disciplinary attention to the principles of sustainability and environmental stewardship are courses in environmental ethics and critical thinking taught with an emphasis on consumption of resources, animal rights, and food justice. A variety of courses from across the college have incorporated readings from Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation*, selected as the 2010 Common Reading. And at LaGuardia’s Fall 2010 Opening Sessions, Anna Lappé, author of *Diet for a Hot Planet*, addressed the theme of food production and consumption. Recognizing the increasing competitiveness within the field of green careers, the Division of Adult and Continuing Education has partnered with NYDesigns to offer courses such as Fundamentals of Building Green and Introduction to Building Energy Efficiency as well as a specialized program in LEED Building Design and Construction. A LEED Green Associate certification module is also available to students, faculty, and staff (“Courses”).

**Recommendations**

**Recycling**

More can be done at LaGuardia to reduce our carbon footprint. For example, cafeterias account for a large percentage of greenhouse gases generated by universities. In our own cafeterias, dated and energy-consuming freezers and ice machines should be upgraded, replaced by machines that use less electricity and water; smart hoods that control heat and smoke levels should also be purchased. The college could also add a provision to the next food service contract requiring that a percentage of the capital improvements required of the contractor be used to support the purchase of such equipment.

Expanding recycling and composting programs will also help meet college goals for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. At St. John’s University and the Queens Botanical Garden, we were introduced to various composting systems, ranging from simple to complex. Although we quickly determined that a mechanized composter is not appropriate for LaGuardia use, the visits opened our eyes to the possibilities, benefits, and problems of organic composting on an urban campus. LaGuardia lacks both the space and staff necessary to support a large-scale composting operation, which, unless closely monitored,
attracts vermin and fruit flies. A small-scale approach would provide an interim solution: indoor worm composting bins that do not require abundant energy or maintenance. A further recommendation is that the college conduct a waste audit to determine the percentage of recycled items that end up as garbage in landfills. Audits of this kind have been completed by the CUNY Law School and Baruch College (“Sustainable”). Similar efforts at LaGuardia will contribute to our recycling program and help meet our goals of reducing carbon emissions.

**Nutrition**

Educating the college community about the benefits of a healthier diet – reduction of obesity rates, control of disease, and protection of the environment – could take place in both the classroom and the cafeteria. For example, LaGuardia’s Dietetic Technician Program addresses sustainable nutrition issues in a variety of ways. Students currently participate in the annual Cornell University-sponsored Cooperative Extension Farmers Market Nutrition Education Program, a community-based approach to educating shoppers at farmers’ markets about the importance of increasing the amount of fruits and vegetables in their diet (“At the Farmer’s Market”). Other disciplines could design similar experiential partnerships and pedagogies that relate environmental and health concepts to everyday life.

Another area for improvement is the college cafeteria. Substituting beans for beef not only contributes to a healthier diet, but also reduces dependence on an industry whose current methods of raising, transporting, and killing cattle releases dangerously high levels of CO2 into the atmosphere. While “going local” and purchasing only foods produced closer to home (or buying only fair trade products) is beyond its budget, the cafeteria could advance sustainability in ways that will not pass the cost on to students, faculty, and staff. For example, the Meatless Monday movement promotes a menu of beans, vegetables, and whole grains, foods that are familiar to the home cooking of many of our students (“Campaign”). The cafeteria could provide handouts detailing the advantages of Meatless Mondays for those less familiar with a legume-based diet.
Outreach and Education
Finally, closer ties between the Sustainability Council, Student Government, and curriculum committees could result in more active and creative outreach to students and the development of new programs and projects. For example, the Council could partner with Student Government to design and advertise sustainability events similar to “Green Week,” which will be celebrated in April 2011. Curricular possibilities include connecting high schools, College Now and GED programs to the new Environmental Science major and offering certificate options to credit and noncredit students interested in green careers.

Growth in research opportunities will also increase awareness of the sustainability movement among LaGuardia students. An expansion of the Newtown Creek Water Monitoring Project to other local contaminated water bodies, for example, the Gowanus Canal (Navarro), could engage more students, faculty, and staff in a variety of efforts. These efforts could include working with community boards and organizations, researching wildlife and waterways, and furnishing the cleanup of a century’s worth of hazardous waste.

To familiarize LaGuardia students with sustainability projects, college faculty can utilize the NYC Solar Map, due to launch in April 2011. This Web-based solar map teaches city residents about solar energy, the amount of sunlight needed for photovoltaic (PV) panels, and resulting savings in energy (Graff). Students use the Solar Map in evidence-based proposals for solar-related projects. Projects could be specific to our campus: for example, gauging the feasibility of installing solar panels on roofs or sides of campus buildings and siting solar panels along our parking lot to power electric vehicle charging stations. Proposals would involve cost estimates, energy savings and CO2 savings data. The college should explore the possibility of developing courses related to renewable energy or, at the very least, existing courses in engineering and math, for example, can be made more hands-on and replicate LYCEE’s efforts to provide students with practical experience for futures in the green economy.

Most important, the Sustainability Council needs its own operating budget. Here LaGuardia might follow the example of Hunter College, which recently created a Green Initiative Fund, modeled after a similar effort at the University of California, to support environmental projects proposed by members of the Hunter community. At present, unused
funds from the Student Activity Fee, equaling $43,000, are slated to be reallocated to a Hunter committee that oversees the fund. Composed with students in the majority, the committee’s goal is to empower students and actively engage them in sustainability initiatives (“Sustainable”). As at Hunter, in order to be an effective conduit for change, LaGuardia’s Sustainability Council must be able to fund internal initiatives as well as solicit outside initiatives from students, faculty, and staff. The current structure of relying on divisions and departments to propose and fund initiatives is no longer viable.

Envisioning the Future
As the above examples illustrate, the Sustainability Council is committed to raising consciousness about practices that can conserve resources, promote health, prepare students for a greener economy, and serve the well-being of our community. Despite the numerous challenges before us, we are committed to achieving the goals of PlaNYC and to making a discernible impact on our campus’s ecological footprint. To succeed in these objectives, the Council needs all parts of our campus ecosystem to connect interdependently in support of a community aware of its limits but capable of creating a healthier environment. If we look back to the five young women in the campus courtyard powering iPods with the sun’s energy, we realize that the meaning of sustainability comes alive through experimentation. All over LaGuardia, we see the photographs, paintings, sculptures, and installations of student artists. In a similar spirit, let all of us at LaGuardia join together to promote sustainability and environmental health in our buildings and bodies, classrooms and minds, cafeterias and courtyards.

Works Consulted


Elmsox, Kitami. Message to Judi O’Toole. Nov. 2010. E-mail.


Using the Sociological Imagination in the Classroom to Explore Green Consumerism

Steven Lang, Social Science

In the fall of 2009, students in my SSS100, Introduction to Sociology, class learned how to cultivate and apply the sociological imagination to issues and debates about sustainable or “green” consumption. The term “sociological imagination,” a core concept in most introduction to sociology texts, was coined by the late C. Wright Mills, who, in a 1959 book of the same name, defined it as a form of reflective and historically-grounded thinking that enables people to establish a link between their personal experiences and choices and the social factors that influence them (5–8). For Mills, the sociological imagination is especially important because people are “[s]eldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives” (3–4) and the larger structural forces that shape them.

Although social forces influence us, we are not totally determined by them. A key task of the sociological imagination is to lay bare the connection between the ways that society shapes us and the ways that we shape ourselves – to grasp the way our activities both structure the social world and at the same time are structured by it. For Mills, grasping the “interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world” enables people to learn to “cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to control the structural transformation that usually lie behind them” (4).

Consumer Culture as a Way of Life
Understanding how cultural values and beliefs associated with consumerism have become an important feature of modern capitalist societies forms a key component in my Introduction to Sociology classes at LaGuardia Community College. The sociological imagination is a good theoretical lens to explore how our constantly growing culture of consumption impacts our daily lives and how we in turn influence...
In class, I focused on the ways that our attitudes and choices about how and what to consume are rooted in larger structural social, political, and economic conditions. To help students understand the historical roots of our modern consumer culture and how it has become a pervasive force that structures and shapes attitudes, values, and everyday activities, I assigned selections from classic texts on the sociology of consumption such as *Captains of Consciousness* by Stuart Ewen, *Enchanting a Disenchanted World*, in which George Ritzer analyzed the role of “cathedrals of consumption,” *No Logo* by Naomi Klein, and *Fast Food Nation* by Eric Schlosser, as well as a chapter on consumption from the sociology textbook, *The Real World*, by Kerry Ferris and Jill Stein. I also showed a documentary video entitled *The Story of Stuff*, produced and narrated by environmental activist Annie Leonard. The film explores the structural component of individualized consumption and its economic, social, and environmental impacts. By placing our contemporary consumer practices in a larger historical and cultural context, these initial readings provided students with a theoretical framework that enabled them to focus and reflect upon the key tenet of the sociological imagination – the interplay between self and the social structures of society.

People in the United States have not always been enthusiastic consumers. Boundless consumption did not come easily to people socialized into a culture that stressed thrift and frugality. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, as the industrial system of mass production expanded, business leaders enlisted the nascent advertising industry to help sell their products. Having transformed the realm of production, business elites turned to the realm of consumption. According to Ewen, these captains of industry became “captains of consciousness” in order to reshape attitudes towards consuming so that people felt comfortable about shopping and purchasing non-necessities (4). Consumption increased dramatically once businesses shifted from giving consumers what they wanted, to seducing them into wanting and needing the things they were producing and selling. Increased production required that continuous consumption for the sake of consumption become a
cultural norm. Gradually, the capitalist maxim “grow or die” became “buy or die.” In *The Story of Stuff*, Annie Leonard points out that shortly after World War II, retail analyst Victor Lebow outlined an economic strategy that was soon to become a guiding principle of society:

Our enormously productive economy . . . demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption . . . we need things consumed, burned up, replaced and discarded at an ever-accelerating rate.

Consumerism gradually emerged as a dominant ideology that functions like a secular religion. In our contemporary consumer landscape, malls and big box retail stores such as Walmart have become ubiquitous. These highly efficient and rationalized forms of retailing, which are structured in ways that almost compel people to shop, have, according to Ritzer, become “cathedrals of consumption” that exude an enchanted and sacred aura that makes a trip feel like a religious pilgrimage (8).

From the cradle to the grave, people are socialized to seek happiness through consumption with the result that living in a “branded world” becomes second nature (Klein). In short, consumption has become a pervasive economic and cultural force that impacts individuals, workplaces, communities, and especially, the environment.

**The Discourse of Sustainability and the Rise of Green Consumerism**

While consumer culture serves many functions, many environmental sociologists long regarded unbridled consumption as a major source of the modern environmental crisis. For example, the first Earth Day celebration, held in 1970, vilified unlimited economic growth and the excessive consumption that accompanied it as environmental evils. Environmental scholars and activists pointed out that the American consumer society created a culture of waste that used up resources and damaged the environment. But, within a relatively short period of time, partly as a result of the emphasis on sustainable development, consumption went from being an environmental sin to being a positive, virtuous activity that benefited both the economy and the environment.
By the twentieth anniversary of Earth Day, attitudes towards consumption had started to shift, as environmental activists began to preach the gospel of green consumerism and environmentally conscious shopping. Instead of damaging the environment, shopping came to be regarded by many as a way to save it.

In class, to show how this ideological shift came about, I discussed how the discourse of sustainability has reframed the way people think about environmental issues and problems. The term “sustainability” rose to prominence after the 1987 publication of a report by the World Commission on Environment and Development entitled *Our Common Future*, in which sustainable development was defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (43). The stress on sustainability represented a paradigm shift away from the then prevalent view which held that the economic logic of capitalism was inherently destructive of the environment and that there might be limits to continuous economic growth and development. Instead of viewing economic growth and development as an environmental bad, proponents of sustainability argued that it was possible to strike a balance among economic growth, environmental protection, and social equity. Advocates of sustainability began to envision win-win scenarios in which making profits and protecting the environmental health of the planet went hand in hand. Such a notion radically changed the way people thought about the environmental consequences of consumerism and shopping (Gould and Lewis).

Thus, for advocates of “green consumerism,” people’s buying power is a powerful force for change. By avoiding products manufactured under conditions that exploit workers and degrade the environment, consumers can vote with their dollars and influence the actions of major corporations. In a press release accompanying the 2004 publication of *Good Stuff? A Behind-the-Scenes Guide to the Things We Buy*, issued by the Worldwatch Institute, Lisa Mastny, co-director of the project, is quoted as saying:

> Our purchasing can be a double-edged sword. When we aren’t aware of the impacts of our purchases on the environment and other people, we can do harm unknowingly. But when we do have the knowledge and the will to make informed choices,
our purchases can be beneficial – stimulating wider markets for products that improve our health, protect the environment, and help poorer communities around the world. (Worldwatch)

Using the Sociological Imagination to Think Structurally about Sustainable Consumption

While the interest in green consumerism is growing, green consumerism also has many critics and raises many questions. To give students a feel for the key issues, I assigned selections from *Ecological Intelligence: How Knowing the Hidden Impacts of What We Buy Can Change Everything*, by Daniel Goleman, a journalist and advocate of green consumerism and “ecological transparency;” *The Myth of Green Marketing: Tending Our Goats at the Edge of Apocalypse*, by Toby Smith, a staunch critic of green consumerism; and the article entitled “Individualization: Plant A Tree, Buy A Bike, Save the World,” by Michael Maniates, which offers another critical perspective. These works addressed key questions: Is green consumerism a real force for change or a subtle diversion from the questioning of our consumer culture? Does it inhibit people from thinking about consumption in systemic and structural terms – a key priority of the sociological imagination?

For Mills, at the core of the sociological imagination is the ability to recognize how our personal troubles are connected to issues of public social structure. It is precisely this ability that green consumerism problematizes with its emphasis on individual choice and behavior and its underemphasis on issues of public social structure.

In many cases, social movements reframe people’s personal or private misfortunes so that they are viewed as social problems that are caused by social structural forces. For example, the modern feminist movement was able to frame women’s psychological pain as a symptom of gender inequality and patriarchal oppression, insisting that “the personal is political” (Hanisch). In a similar vein, the environmental toxics and environmental health movements reframed people’s personal experiences as public issues by telling them that the miscarriages, birth defects, cancers, and high rates of asthma that were occurring in their communities were not private or personal tragedies but the result of irresponsible corporations that had polluted their environment. In recent years, childhood obesity and the health problems associated with it have also been undergoing the transformation from personal problem
to public issue. Is green consumerism part of a social movement that is reframing the way individuals think about the relationship between their individual consumer choices and larger structural conditions? Or is it transforming a public environmental issue into a private trouble with the result that people go from being citizens concerned with changing political and economic structures and institutions to being individual consumers concerned with protecting or enhancing their lifestyles? Maniates refers to this individual response to environmental problems as the “individualization of responsibility” and argues that “[w]hen responsibility for environmental problems is individualized, there is little room to ponder institutions, the nature and exercise of political power, or the ways of collectively changing the distribution of power and influence in society – to, in other words, ‘think institutionally’” (174, emphasis in the original). In short, for Maniates, individualized green consumption reinforces and legitimates the culture of consumption – a major source of our environmental ills.

In The Sociological Imagination, Mills argues that when “the very structure of opportunities has collapsed,” then people are not really making choices about their circumstances (9). They are, instead, involved in an illusion of choice. For example, while people can choose to ride a bike or buy a green car, they cannot choose to alter the structure of our mass transportation system so that it is clean, efficient, and effective. In a similar vein, while they can choose to buy bottled water that is clean, they do not really have a choice about cleaning up the water supply and making our tap water safe for everyone.

Organic food enthusiasts often claim that buying organic food is a political act and that their choice to buy it is changing the world one shopping basket at a time. Is choosing to buy green or organic food products the same thing as choosing to change the political economy and structure of our industrialized agricultural system? Pesticide residues, antibiotics, and hormones in food are the result of the way most crops are grown and farm animals raised in the United States. These systemic threats require system solutions, such as raising crops differently.

Does green consumerism’s emphasis on individual buying power divert people’s attention away from thinking about systemic change? Following Mills, does it reframe a social issue and transform it into personal problem? Is Maniates correct when he argues that citizens’ “individual consumption choices are environmentally important, but
that their control over these choices is constrained, shaped, and framed by institutions and political forces that can be remade only through collective citizen action, as opposed to individual consumer behavior” (183, emphasis in the original)? This was a key question that I wanted my students to reflect upon and write about by applying the tools of the sociological imagination.

Exploring the Life Cycle of the Stuff We Consume
To help my students dive a little deeper into these issues, I asked them to write about the environmental impact of their own consumption behavior and to use their sociological imagination as a framework to reflect on the relationship between their personal choices and wider cultural, economic, and political structures. In order to accomplish this goal, I developed a staged, three-part assignment. For the first part of the assignment, the students were asked to document briefly the growing concern with sustainability in general and sustainable consumption in particular and to discuss key issues and debates by referring to the above-mentioned readings.

Next, to concretize this macro-historical analysis, students were asked to perform a life cycle analysis of a particular food product and to rate it in terms of its environmental sustainability. Life cycle analysis, a methodology that emerged from the discipline of industrial ecology, teaches us to view the entire life cycle of consumer products “from cradle to grave,” taking into account the hidden environmental and social costs associated with the process by which they are produced, used, and eventually disposed of. The twenty-minute video entitled The Story of Stuff – an explanation of how the unseen costs of consumer products impact workers, communities, and the environment – illustrated the environmental life cycle approach to evaluating products (Leonard).

To evaluate the sustainability of their chosen food product, students used a tool called GoodGuide, a website that subjects approximately 75,000 products to life cycle analysis and rates their environmental, health, and social impacts. Increasingly, more and more similar tools are becoming available to businesses and consumers: Another example is SkinDeep, a website that analyzes ingredients in personal care products and ranks them according to levels of toxicity.

For the third part of the assignment, I asked students to write about how increased knowledge about a product’s environmental sustainabil-
ity might impact consumption practices. They were to reflect upon their own experiences with sustainability labeling as well as to explore its wider economic and social implications. In class, we discussed whether increased knowledge about the ecological and social impact of food products provided by tools like GoodGuide would influence shopping habits in any way. The class’s experience with GoodGuide as a tool to analyze food products was mixed. Many students felt overwhelmed. One student felt that having access to so much information made her shopping experience “a drag.” Another pointed out that “trying to eat green is a lot of work.” Overall, most felt that the exercise helped them to think about how the ordinary stuff that they purchased on a regular basis has far-reaching environmental repercussions. They also felt skeptical about the steady proliferation of green labels that are not substantiated. One student criticized a label on a rice casserole product that claimed to be “green and perfectly natural,” having found that it was “full of nasty chemicals.” Another showed the class an advertisement for an “eco-friendly and natural” chocolate candy bar “that was the same old junk food with a fancy name.”

The really big question that emerged from this project was whether such knowledge was a form of power that enabled individual consumers to change the political and economic structure of what Schlosser refers to as our “Fast Food Nation.” Do tools like GoodGuide, which enhance knowledge about the hidden ecological impacts of consumer products, thereby put power into the hands of consumers? Do they change the relationship between consumers and products by bringing about conditions of what Daniel Goleman calls ”ecological transparency” (“Green”)? For Goleman, “as we are able to make choices based on full information, power transfers from those who sell to those who buy…. We become the shapers of our destiny rather than passive victims. Just by going to the store, we will vote with our dollars (Ecological 10). Does GoodGuide or tools like it enable people to really “vote with their dollars,” as Goleman and other advocates of green consumerism claim? While most students felt that more knowledge was a good thing, they also agreed with Annie Leonard who argued on The Story of Stuff Project website that our consumer culture poses a systemic, social problem in need of social solutions:

Our current consumption patterns are unsustainable and inequitable and must be changed. But changing consumer behavior
isn’t enough. Yes, when we shop, we should buy the least damaging product available and affordable, but consumption is a systems problem, meaning our choices at the supermarkets are pre-determined and limited by political and institutional forces beyond the store. (Leonard, “Consumption”)

In answering this important question, one student wrote about how the emphasis on green consumerism produces a more skeptical attitude toward the social and environmental impacts of excessive consumption. “Shopping until we drop is now environmentally cool. What about the environmental impact of the junk we buy?” He agreed with Toby Smith, who argued that green consumerism deflects serious questioning of our “expansionistic, growth-oriented ethic” (10). Another student wrote that shopping for sustainability at the individual level would not change larger institutional forces that promote unsustainability, even though, she thought, it might exert some influence. Given that economics trumps environmental concerns when it comes to sustainability, she argued that it is likely that green products and green shopping will remain a marginal phenomenon for people with money who can afford to shop at stores such as Whole Foods. In a class discussion, a nursing student with a three-year old daughter raised a similar issue that resonated with the entire class: “I think this information is great. I want to eat healthy food that doesn’t harm the environment or the workers that produce it. I just can’t afford it.” This comment got the class thinking a lot about Walmart’s recent sustainability initiative.

**Walmart’s Sustainability Initiative**

*Corporate Greenwashing or Consumer Power?*

Walmart raised the issue of ecological transparency in 2009, when it announced that it was developing a sustainability index that would access and label the environmental and social costs of the products that it sells in its stores. Given its size and influence, Walmart’s mission to make consumption smarter and more sustainable could have far reaching impacts throughout the globe. According to Goleman, Walmart’s sustainability initiative has set off an “ecological earthquake” that marks the dawning of “the era of ecological transparency in the marketplace” (“Green”).
As a class, we discussed some of the possible implications of Walmart’s environmental sea change and questioned if the world’s largest retailer, with its immense power and influence over manufacturing and production processes, could transform the way we produce and consume things. Many scholars and environmentalists, some of them former haters of the retail giant, are coming to the conclusion that Walmart, because of its sheer size, may be the only entity capable of making sustainable consumption a reality (Diamond). Could this “cathedral of consumption” finally bring about environmental changes that environmentalists have been fighting for but unable to achieve?

Walmart launched its recent sustainability initiative in the aftermath of negative publicity campaigns conducted by labor, community, and environmental organizations that portrayed the company as a behemoth that exploited its workers, squeezed its suppliers, and devastated communities and the environment. To familiarize students with recent controversies surrounding Walmart, I assigned short newspaper articles such as “Don’t Blame Wal-Mart,” by Robert Reich, “Not Ready for Wal-Mart,” by Tom Angotti, and “Will Big Business Save the Earth?” by Jared Diamond. We also explored pro and anti-Walmart websites such as WalMartWatch.com and the Walmart company website, and watched clips from the documentary films entitled Food Inc. and “Is Walmart Good for America?”

Since many students in the class had some familiarity with Walmart’s image problem, I tried to assigned readings and facilitate discussions that would build upon their previous knowledge. Many in the class shopped at a Walmart store whenever they got a chance. One student had worked in a Walmart store before moving to New York City and another pointed out that while she hated Walmart’s destructive policies, she shopped there because of their “low prices and great bargains.”

In class, we explored some of the reasons behind Walmart’s attempt to make consumption smarter and sustainable. We debated whether Walmart’s greening strategy was a sophisticated public relations scheme to project a favorable image – a technique that has been called “greenwashing” – an attempt to increase profits by increasing efficiency and reducing waste, or a response to consumer demands for healthier and sustainable products.
It is likely that what began purely as a defensive, public relations marketing move changed, almost accidentally, into a sound business strategy after the company realized that its various greening strategies were big money savers. As Gary Hirshberg, CEO and founder of the Stonyfield organic yogurt company, argued in the documentary Food Inc., “Walmart’s interest in sustainability and organic foods isn’t about moral enlightenment – it’s basic business.”

The key question for the class was whether Walmart was pushed into this green and profitable business strategy because of the efforts of consumers who were demanding sustainable products and voting with their dollars. Only time will provide answers to this question. During discussion, a student made a comment that resonated with the class: “If Walmart can sell quality organic food at a price that I can afford, then I don’t care why they are going green. I just care that they are doing it.” Many others in the class agreed and felt that if Walmart would change its ways and sell organic products at low cost without exploiting workers or the environment in the process, then they might change their shopping habits.

Conclusion
In explorations and discussions about the interplay between individual consumption experiences and larger cultural, economic, and political forces, our class raised more questions than answers. However, by creating a classroom culture that encouraged and enabled students to cultivate their sociological imaginations, the course empowered the students to place their personal experiences of consumption in a wider context. They became familiar with the key arguments and debates surrounding sustainable consumption. More important, they used the sociological imagination to think about the link between their personal experiences and the social factors that influence those experiences. I hoped that, by reflecting and writing about how their personal choices interact with institutional arrangements, they would see corroboration of Mill’s claim that “[n]either the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both”(3).
Works Consulted


This paper reviews the importance of the human-animal bond (HAB), and suggests a manner of teaching it within the confines of a two-year veterinary technology program. The American Veterinary Medical Association defines the human-animal bond as “a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both” (“Human-Animal Bond”). The awareness of the interconnection between our own cognitive/emotional state and that of those around us – human and animal – is one definition of mindfulness. In order to be effective, veterinary technology students must be mindful of the relationships formed by the client (the person who belongs to the animal), the patient (the animal), and the caregivers (the professionals such as veterinarians and veterinary technicians).

It can be argued that the HAB represents the relation between, on the one hand, the technical, medical, and technological information our students must absorb and, on the other, the psychological evaluation of the patient/client relationship that, once made, informs the students’ ability to treat the patient. A strong HAB can be a positive force for client participation in patient care; however, if the HAB is too strong, patients may suffer. Individuals who hoard many animals tend not to care for them well, despite their profession of love (Berry, Patronek, and Lockwood). A violent or neglectful relationship also demonstrates an aberrant bond (DeGue and Dilillo; Yin). Doctors and technicians must be able to recognize types of relationships in order to determine how best to serve client and patient.

The recognition of the bond between humans and animals extends back thousands of years. Some of the earliest understanding of life in the Stone Age comes from cave paintings that depict daily experiences. Whether symbiotic or adversarial, relationships between animals and
humans are prominent in paintings discovered by Chauvet and his fel-
low explorers (Chauvet, Deschamps, and Hillaire). Tens of thousands
of years old, they include spectacularly detailed images of animals.
Clearly, the HAB existed even in prehistoric times; it is important that
our students recognize its power.

The Problem
Veterinary medicine has advanced tremendously in the past ten years.
Procedures once thought to be the province of human medicine have
found their way into veterinary medicine. Similarly, many veterinary
technician students will specialize in areas such as dentistry, radiology,
nutrition, emergency care (criticlist), and internal medicine. Radiol-
ogy has expanded to include MRI and CT scans routinely performed in
specialty practices; some large referral centers have linear accelerators
for radiation therapy in cases of feline and canine cancer. Technicians
also offer services such as acupuncture and physical therapy. Given the
breadth of information our students must acquire, little time is left to
teach the HAB, despite its importance in clinical practice.

Literature Review
Study of the HAB has been approached from a number of perspectives.
One area of research is the relationship between companion animals
and the physical and emotional well-being of the elderly. Investigat-
ing the effects of the interaction with pets on institutionalized older
adults, Kawamura and his colleagues found that for those who had
the opportunity to visit with animals on a regular basis, there was a
significant increase in self-care activities, as well as greater interest in
interacting with others. Another intriguing study, using both live and
plush (“stuffed”) animals, looked at the impact of dogs on persons with
dementia. The study found a clear increase in engagement with the
environment in individuals given regular opportunity to interact with
dogs; interestingly, the study subjects were most engaged by live pup-
pies, next by plush toys, and least by living small dogs (Marx, et al.).
Other measurement indices regard the relationships between animals
and humans. Commonly used is the Lexington Attachment to Pets
Scale (LAPS), a paper-and-pencil survey that establishes the depth of
a person’s attachment to a companion animal (Johnson, Garrity, and
Stallones).
Professions beyond veterinary medicine are looking at these measures as ways to assess the human condition. Increasingly, people in social work and forensic medicine study the relationship between humans and companion animals when either or both are under duress. A study done at the University of California at Davis looked at the relationship of homeless people and their pets (Singer, Hart, and Zasloff), a companionship so strongly felt that 93% of the men and 96% of the women indicated that they would refuse shelter or public housing if their pets could not accompany them.

The relationship between animal abuse and domestic violence has also been studied. In general, persons exposed to, or participating in, animal abuse have experienced physical violence in the home; they may even initiate domestic violence themselves (DeGue and Dilillo). Studying battered women and their pets, Strand and Faver found that after leaving the abuser, abused women often return home to feed or check up on their pet, a decision that can expose them to further abuse or danger. Some women will not leave home, fearing the harm the abuser will do, or threatens to do, to the animal (Strand and Faver; Faver and Strand). Forensic veterinary science has begun to deal with signs of abuse in animals, learning to recognize its signs in the clinic and to diagnose it during necropsy. Sophia Yin has identified signs of animal abuse that all veterinary personnel – doctors, technicians, and front-office staff – should be aware of to serve their patients and clients.

Another dimension of the investigation of the HAB is the study of the deleterious effects of the serious illness or death of a pet on the family. Much time has been devoted to the study of the stages of grief as they affect not only the client who brings the pet, but also the medical personnel who treat them. Ross and Baron-Sorenson look at the effect of loss or death of a companion animal on both the veterinary community and the client. They discuss natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, associated with threat to both the emotional and physical well-being of its victims (ch. 10). Katrina survivors, as well as those who watched the disaster from afar, remember those who refused to leave their homes because they could not bring their dog or cat to government-provided shelter. In disaster, awareness of the importance of the HAB in governing human behavior is crucial. In fact, one of the most important things to note is that the veterinarian, the veterinary technician, and their support staff must recognize the needs of the client...
as much as those of the patient. A veterinarian of the author’s acquaintance remarked that recognition of the HAB is often the determining factor in whether veterinary personnel will even have the opportunity to do any treatment. Respect for the client’s needs and desires is as important as respect for those of the patient; the client who feels cared for by the veterinarian and technician will readily bring the animal in for treatment.

Discussing the relationship between the HAB and grief, Lagoni, Butler, and Hetts make a point of looking at both verbal (ch. 7) and non-verbal (ch. 6) aspects of counseling humans that figure importantly in helping them to deal with loss. Their work reminds us to be mindful not only of what we say, but also of what we are doing as we speak and what our listener is doing. There are many guidelines for dealing with matters relating to grief and euthanasia that help the practitioner, as much as the client, make reasonable decisions. When there is a strong HAB and a critically ill patient, the professionals involved are subject to vicarious traumatization, as noted in Figley’s remarks about the effect of compassion fatigue on health care professionals who become numb or unable to offer enough emotional support to the client. While it is, difficult for the client to accept the death of a beloved animal, the loss is hard for the professional as well.

As doctors and veterinary technicians, we recognize that a humane end to untreatable critical illness is a part of our work. This recognition does not, however, lessen our feeling that we have somehow failed. It is important that we make our students aware of the issues surrounding end-of-life situations, so that they are prepared for the strong emotions that they will experience.

The care of critically ill patients involves every member of the veterinary care team: veterinarian, veterinary technician, receptionist/front-office staff, and office managers. Yet, not all of this care will take place in the office or clinic. For example, in dealing with the geriatric oncology patient, there is increasing use of hospice and palliative care to provide a reasonable quality of life while allowing the patient to be at home. Villalobos and Kaplan have been strong proponents of this movement, which “[dignifies] the profession by expressing respect for the patients and their caretakers” (302). As veterinary hospice care is often provided by veterinary technicians, its skills are ones that our students must acquire.
The question thus becomes one of finding a way to convey the information about the human-animal bond to our students. There are a number of studies of extracurricular learning environments, particularly Journal Clubs (Sims, Howell, and Harbison; Lee et al.; Thompson). Journal clubs are environments where students bring in published material pertinent to a chosen area of interest and discuss what they have found. Cave and Clandinin conducted formalized research into the utility of this technique. Their year-long investigation into the effect of a journal club on medical students demonstrated improvements in standardized measures of collegiality and professional identity. Other studies however, relied strictly on anecdotal evidence as a way of evaluating the effectiveness of this approach to learning clubs (Sims, Howell, and Harbison; Lee et al.; Thompson). Certainly, a potential way to educate our students about the important topic of the human-animal bond is by going outside the classroom.

A Potential Solution

At LaGuardia Community College, the intense focus of the Veterinary Technician (Vet Tech) program on fundamental skills (vocabulary, math, psychomotor skills associated with physical exams, and nursing) consumes available class time. But given the weight of accumulating evidence on the importance of the HAB, it is clear that we must train our students to be mindful of the complexity of emotions associated with pet ownership. Using an extra-curricular mode of presentation is one way to communicate essential information that cannot be covered in class.

In May 2009, the Vet Tech program formed the Veterinary Technology Club. The students viewed it as an opportunity to engage in discussion of common problems, a forum for some continuing education activities, and a fund-raising vehicle. Among the areas of interest mentioned by the students were the issues of animal abuse, holistic medicine, and the HAB.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis of this research is that presenting information about the HAB in the less formal environment of an extracurricular activity, such as the Vet Tech Club, will accomplish the goal of education without sacrificing the classroom time needed for more technological topics.
Method
In November 2009, a pre-survey was given to the members of the class of 2010 during a lecture class that included the entire cohort. (See Appendix for pre- and post-surveys.) The survey was given to all students in the second (final) year of the Veterinary Technology Program. Although survey responses were anonymous, the students were asked whether they were members of the Veterinary Technology Club.

In April 2010, the Veterinary Technology Club sponsored an evening of discussion of the HAB open to both Club and non-Club members. Present were a veterinarian (the author) and two social workers. The lecture lasted approximately two hours, with time for questions afterward. The post-survey was administered in May 2010. The questions in the pre- and post-surveys were identical, with the single exception that the post-survey asked if the respondent had attended the Club event described above.

Results
Survey Return Rate
The thirty-four students in the class ranged from twenty to fifty-one years of age; 98% were female. The return rate of the pre-survey was 76%. The twenty-six completed pre-surveys were designated as Group A. Eleven of the students who completed the pre-survey also completed the post-survey (42%). These eleven completed post-surveys were designated Group B.

Club Membership
In Group A, eighteen students (69%) were Club members. In Group B, six students (54%) were Club members. However, not all of the students who returned the post-survey had attended the presentation. Of the seven students in Group B who attended the Club presentation, six (86%) were Club members. The table below compares the characteristics of the students in the two groups and their responses to survey questions about the study of the HAB.
### Table 1
#### Pre- and Post-Survey Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group A (pre-survey, November 2009) % (number/total)</th>
<th>Group B (post-survey, May 2010) % (number/total)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Survey return rate</td>
<td>76% (26/34)</td>
<td>42% (11/26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Club membership</td>
<td>69% (18/26)</td>
<td>54% (06/11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work with animals</td>
<td>50% (13/26)</td>
<td>46% (05/11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended HAB workshop</td>
<td>data unavailable</td>
<td>64% (07/11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(April 2010)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student responses</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used word “relationship”</td>
<td>15% (04/26)</td>
<td>66% (07/11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt that HAB was taught</td>
<td>35% (09/26)</td>
<td>9% (01/11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>well in curriculum</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt that study of HAB is</td>
<td>38% (10/26)</td>
<td>57% (4/7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of primary importance</td>
<td></td>
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**Working with Animals**

In Group A, thirteen students, 50% of the cohort, worked with animals outside of the Vet Tech program. Students who did so, as, for example, a part-time assistant in a clinical practice, spent from five to thirty hours per week in direct client contact. In Group B, five students, 46%, worked with animals, outside those in the program, for two to twenty hours per week.

**Concept Application**

In Group B, seven students, 66% of the cohort, used the word “relationship,” one of the key words used to define the HAB in the lecture given at the Club meeting. In Group A, only four students, 15%, used that specific word.

**Coverage**

In Group A, nine of the students, 35%, felt that the subject of the HAB had been well covered throughout their clinical coursework. In Group B, only one student, 9%, felt that the subject was covered sufficiently; another commented that the discussion as part of the Vet Tech Club lectures was a very valuable contribution to her understanding of the subject.
Importance of the Concept

Students used a scale to indicate their perceptions of the influence of the human-animal bond on client compliance with medical recommendations. In Group A, ten students, 38%, felt the study of the HAB was of primary importance; 52% felt it was of major importance, and 10% had no opinion. Of those who attended the lectures in Group B, four of the students, 57%, felt that the study of the HAB was of primary importance. Three students, 43%, felt it was of major importance. No one felt it was of minor importance.

Discussion of the Intervention

An early discovery was that the nature of the Club activities depended a great deal on the degree to which meetings were planned and agendas constructed. As a new club, agendas were in flux, and meetings were often held on different days of the week and at different times of day. This fluctuation was caused by student commitments to the care of the animals at the College, the occurrence of major and/or final examinations, and the newness of the project. Because the Club was not well-known, attendance varied considerably. As a result of these variables, the Club discussion of the HAB was postponed until April, although our pre-survey was given in Fall I. In addition, this meant that only one evening was devoted to the HAB, a direct consequence of the difficulty in scheduling regular meetings. Ideally, further sessions would have been provided.

The poor return of the post-surveys most likely reflects the fact that the surveys were given in late May. At this point, students were almost ready to take their final exams, and had other things on their minds. Taking time during class to complete and return the surveys would improve the return rate. Given the low response rate, the percentages indicated above must be viewed with caution. However, a few general conclusions stand out. First, students who attended the HAB lecture were already Club members. If we hope to offer additional educational experiences to our students by way of extracurricular activities, we must find ways to encourage nonmembers to attend educational presentations. Second, working in a veterinary practice outside of school seems to have no bearing on student interest in the topic of the HAB. Whether or not they were in contact with clients on a daily basis, the same percentage of students came to the lecture.
Third, the purpose of noting the use of “relationship” in defining the HAB is that this concept was a focus of the material presented in the lecture. All of the speakers used this concept to define and describe the HAB. In Group A, 15% of the students used the word “relationship” compared with 66% in Group B. Once again, although these percentages are impressive, they are not statistically significant, given the small experimental cohort involved. However, they do suggest that the lecture had some impact. With regard to the data collected on the importance of the HAB, the students who had been to the lecture, in comparison with those who had not, felt that the HAB was of primary importance in determining whether the client would seek treatment for an animal.

Lastly, it would seem that even with the additional HAB information presented in the Club, most students felt that they did not get enough exposure to the subject. Many rated coverage of the topic in the classroom as fair or poor. Given that we have insufficient time to teach the HAB, it is not surprising that students feel deficient in this area. Conversations with students after the event revealed that they uniformly enjoyed the presentation and felt they had learned a lot from it.

Note that analysis of the qualitative questions in the pre- and post-surveys have not been presented here. It is beyond the scope of this paper to look at non-quantitative results. A general study of student attitudes toward the definition of the HAB and its impact on their professional lives certainly merits further investigation.

Conclusion
It would appear that the use of an extra-curricular activity as a way of adding to students’ learning experience has drawbacks when applied to a technological curriculum. Erratic scheduling of Club meetings and difficulty in scheduling more than one event on a given topic are possible explanations for the lack of conclusive evidence of the utility of this approach.

Trends noted above suggest that further study of the HAB should be a part of the learning experiences of veterinary technicians, and that club forums might be a way to provide it. To provide more consistency, the presentations would need to be formalized and student awareness of the availability of such learning experiences would need to be increased. Further study should be directed at developing multiple presentations on the topics, organizing informal student discussion groups, without a
guest speaker, and with a faculty member as a moderator. Recognition of the importance of the topic should also be established. To stimulate student participation, attendance at these events could be rewarded.

The strength of student interest in the subject suggests the need to acquaint our future veterinary technicians with a greater appreciation of the HAB. Modifications to teaching and learning such as those discussed here will likely lead to greater student participation, validating the utility of this approach.

Appendix

Pre-survey, administered in November 2009

1. Are you a member of the Vet Tech. Club? ____ yes ____ no

2. Are you currently working in some capacity in a clinic or hospital (not including research facilities)? ____ If so, how many hours or minutes a week do you spend interacting with clients? ________________________________

3. In a sentence or two, please define what the phrase “Human-Animal Bond” means to you.

4. How would you rate the influence of the human-animal bond on client compliance with medical recommendations? (check one)
   ____ of primary importance
   ____ of major importance
   ____ of minor importance
   ____ has no real influence
   ____ I don’t know

5. List three benefits to the client of a close human-animal bond.


7. Define the term “family practice” as it applies to small animal outpatient care.

8. What do you think is the biggest challenge facing a client in dealing with long-term illness in regard to a companion animal?

9. How well do you think the concept of the human-animal bond has been covered in school?

10. How would you go about getting more information about the study of the human-animal bond?
Post-survey, administered in May 2010

1. Are you a member of the Vet Tech. Club? ____ yes ____ no

2. Did you attend the lecture regarding the human/animal bond and domestic violence given in April 2010? ____ yes ____ no

3. Are you currently working in some capacity in a clinic or hospital (not including research facilities)? ____ yes ____ no
   If so, how many hours or minutes a week do you spend interacting with clients?

4. In a sentence or two, please define what the phrase “Human–Animal Bond” means to you.

5. How would you rate the influence of the human-animal bond on client compliance with medical recommendations? (check one)
   ____ of primary importance
   ____ of major importance
   ____ of minor importance
   ____ has no real influence
   ____ I don’t know


7. List three benefits to the animal of a close human-animal bond.

8. Define the term “family practice” as it applies to small animal outpatient care.

9. What do you think is the biggest challenge facing a client in dealing with long-term illness in regard to a companion animal?

10. How well do you think the concept of the human-animal bond has been covered in school?

11. How would you go about getting more information about the study of the human-animal bond?

12. If you attended the lecture sponsored by the Vet Tech Club in April, did it change your view on the nature of the human/animal bond? How?
Works Consulted


Confronting the Obesity Epidemic at Community Colleges

Robert Jaffe, Office of the President

For the first time in our history, Americans confront the possibility that the life expectancy of future generations will decrease, a chilling prospect foreshadowed by epidemic levels of obesity. Over the last two decades, the rate of obesity has doubled among adults (from 15% to 34%); among children and adolescents, the rate has more than tripled (from 5% to 17%) (White House). Equally alarming is the disproportionate impact of obesity upon women, African-Americans, Latinos, and the poor (Ogden, et al.). These astonishing disparities in the prevalence of obesity should center attention on at-risk populations of students who traditionally choose to study at community colleges. At LaGuardia, we, along with our community college counterparts around the country, may well be at the epicenter of a health crisis.

In 2009, 18.1 million students worked toward an undergraduate degree at an American college or university; millions more participated in non-degree educational programs (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, and Ginder 9). Within the 18–24 age group, over one third (39%) attends college (US. Natl. Center for Educ. Statistics). For these individuals, the transition to adulthood is a period of dramatic change, a stage when they develop lasting attitudes and behaviors. While building greater independence and new interpersonal support systems, young adults are also establishing patterns of eating behavior and physical activity (Nelson et al.). But for many students the health picture is not bright. A national survey undertaken in 2008 by the American College Health Association reveals that almost one-third (31.9%) of college students report being either overweight (21.9%) or obese (10%) (“American” 482).

In the nationwide effort to reduce the scope and impact of the obesity epidemic, colleges should be essential partners with government and community agencies now facing the challenge of high obesity rates. Public officials, most visibly New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and First Lady Michelle Obama, are advancing robust policy propos-
als to promote healthy eating and increased exercise. Philanthropic organizations and government agencies are providing greater funding for research and prevention efforts. Community organizations, schools and employers are responding by establishing an array of programs to encourage healthy eating and exercise. Yet these efforts are not reaching the students most in need. Of the 106 campuses that self-selected to participate in the American College Health (ACH) survey, 101 were four-year institutions. Clearly, the absence of two-year colleges from the ACH survey and other college-based research limits its usefulness in fully understanding the experience, causes, and consequences of obesity for community college students.

This paper explores the effects of the obesity epidemic upon those who attend and work at community colleges, reviews research on obesity conducted mostly at four-year educational institutions, and offers excerpts from interviews with present and past LaGuardia students who share their attitudes toward obesity. Concluding recommendations offer directions to take in preventing obesity among high risk populations at two year colleges.

Physical, Psychological, and Economic Impacts of Obesity
The increase in life expectancy in America, a constant throughout the 20th century, may be reversed by the vast number of those who suffer the debilitating effects of obesity (Olshansky et al.). Health complications and preventable illness associated with the disease include Type II diabetes, cardiovascular ailments, respiratory problems, pregnancy complications, psychological disorders and specific types of cancer (US. Public Health Service). The second cause of premature death after tobacco, obesity results in an estimated 325,000 early deaths (Allison et al.).

Overweight individuals also report a significantly lower health-related quality of life, with greater negative perceptions of their own physical and social functioning, vitality, and mental health (Jia and Lubetkin). Obesity is associated with significant increases in lifetime risk of psychiatric illness, including depression and anxiety disorders (Simon et al.). Also widely reported are stigma and bias against obese people, many of whom face discrimination when applying for employment, earn less than slimmer individuals doing the same jobs, and confront discrimination in school and health care settings (Puhl and Heuer). Overweight and obesity are linked to poorer school perfor-
mance among children and adolescents. Studies investigating obesity and school performance showed a consistent negative association between obesity and academic performance among children and adolescents (Taras and Potts-Datema).

Obesity also takes a financial toll on individuals, health care payers, and employers. First, obese persons are less wealthy than those of average weight (Zagorsky). Second, per capita medical spending for obesity-related care and treatment is estimated to be 42% higher (an additional $1,429 per year) than for someone of “normal” weight (Finkelstein et al.). Finally, employers shoulder greater costs due to loss of worker productivity, increased absenteeism, and higher disability and workers’ compensation costs (Behan et al.).

**Obesity on Campus**

In 2008, a survey of 1600 students at three City University of New York campuses (Hostos Community College, Hunter College, and Medgar Evers College) found that among the respondents 23% were overweight and 14% were obese (City University of New York). Recent nationwide research examining disparities in college students attending four-year colleges noted higher rates of obesity in men, African Americans, and low income students, and significantly higher rates of overweight and obesity were found among students in their later years of college (T. Nelson et al.).

In 2010, in one of the few studies examining community college students, researchers in Minnesota compared students at two- and four-year colleges for differences in prevalence and risk factors associated with weight gain. The study found a higher prevalence of overweight and obesity among students attending the two-year colleges, with a particularly sharp difference for females. Females at two-year colleges also displayed less healthy behavior than their counterparts at four-year colleges, including lower physical activity levels, higher consumption of unhealthy foods and greater sedentary activity (television viewing). Fewer differences were found between men attending two-year and four-year colleges. Importantly, these disparities were found even when controlling for race, ethnicity, and age (Laska et al.).

Most research into the factors that contribute to obesity among college students has been limited to four-year college students. These limited studies offer insights into the challenges college students face
in maintaining a healthy body weight. For example, in 2003, a survey of college students at a large public university indicated that high rates of overweight and obesity may be associated with poor dietary habits, low levels of physical activity, high levels of stress, and unhealthy habits that included large consumption of junk food and late night snacking (Huang et al.). Other research contradicted the popular belief that students gain a significant amount of weight in their first year (the so-called “Freshmen 15”); instead, the 24 studies reviewed found that an average weight gain of approximately five pounds is closer to reality. Nevertheless, the increase is still troubling as weight gain is likely to continue over time (Vella-Zarb and Elgar).

Obesity and Community Colleges

More than four out of ten undergraduates (7.1 million students) attend one of the nation’s 1,103 two-year colleges (US. Natl. Center for Educ. Statistics). Likely to be older, female, poorer, African-American or Hispanic, these students work full-time and attend college part-time (US. Natl. Center for Educ. Statistics). The disparities in obesity rates based on age, gender, race or ethnic group and socioeconomic status noted for the general population suggest that obesity rates for students attending two-year colleges are higher than for those attending 4-year colleges.

If researchers agree that dietary behavior and physical activity are critical factors associated with student obesity, this consensus has not generated an in-depth examination of the prevalence, risk factors, or interventions associated with overweight and obesity among community college students. Except for the Minnesota study noted above, there are no studies that examine the obesity epidemic in the context of community colleges. To address this lack of available research, and with the objective of proposing future interventions that would benefit the health of our student body, I interviewed eleven students and former students in Fall 2010. Each participant (ten females and one male) offered perceptions about obesity and ways that the problem could be addressed at LaGuardia. Six of the participants were current students and five were former students now employed by the college.

Methods of Evaluation

I conducted one-on-one interviews lasting up to 45 minutes; afterwards, I reviewed my notes to identify key themes. Four interview ques-
tions probed attitudes towards obesity, and elicited reflection on the personal, environmental, and societal factors contributing to obesity. Participants responded to the open-ended question, “What comes to mind when you hear the word ‘obesity’?” Interviewees also responded to three additional questions:

- Do you see the issue of obesity as a problem in your community and at the college?
- What factors contribute to the problem and what might be the barriers to maintaining a healthy weight?
- What potential interventions might the college undertake to prevent obesity?

**Observations**
Observations are organized based in the order of the most frequently identified responses offered by participants. (Bullets indicate participants’ remarks.)

1. **Obesity is a deeply personal issue.** Participants spoke very personally either about their direct experiences with weight issues or about those of family members or close friends. These experiences weighed heavily in shaping attitudes. Several participants discussed how individuals they know who are overweight or obese appear to have “lost control” and how psychological issues, such as low self-esteem or addiction, are involved in distorting an individual’s relationship with food:
   - It’s a disease. People are addicted to food or don’t have control.
   - With adults, people need to stop blaming someone else. You don’t need to be a rocket scientist to know that if you eat McDonald’s every day, you will have a problem.

2. **Obesity is seen as a distinctly American phenomenon.** More than half (55%) of LaGuardia students are foreign-born; their origins influence their views of the obesity epidemic. Several participants noted that in their native countries obesity was either not a problem or just emerging as a problem. Interviewees saw American society as encouraging outsized food consumption and unhealthy living. They viewed food preparation and consumption in their native countries as simpler, healthier, and of higher quality: “Everything is bigger in America, including the people.”
3. **Childhood obesity weighs heavily in shaping attitudes.** Whether or not they are parents, participants revealed strong feelings about the growing rate of childhood obesity. Some viewed children as victims of a parent’s poor decisions or failure to establish a healthy approach to food. Working parents’ inability to afford healthy food or to find the time to purchase or prepare it was also mentioned as an important factor contributing to childhood obesity. Excessive playing of video games and television viewing were also cited. Some mentioned the lack of safety and high levels of violence in certain neighborhoods that keep children from playing outdoors. Several stated that heavy advertising of fast food, breakfast cereals, and candy makes it challenging for parents to promote the eating of healthy food:

- Parents aren’t around to give discipline. They give kids whatever food they want whenever they want it.
- It’s easier to go to McDonalds. No time to cook and also you know the child will like it.

4. **Focus is almost solely on diet-related behaviors and little on the importance of physical activity.** Most participants did not voluntarily raise exercise as a valuable approach to maintaining a healthy weight. Without prompting, only two participants pointed to physical activity as important. After being asked, participants acknowledged its value. They also highlighted obstacles to exercise, including lack of time, the cost of gym membership, and the importance of having a “workout buddy” to help motivate one to work regularly or keep fit. Almost none of the participants had taken advantage of LaGuardia’s recreational facilities. Reasons included overcrowding and inconvenient scheduling:

- I constantly speak about getting in shape, but don’t want to pay $100 a month for a gym and it is tough with school. I just don’t have time.
- For me it’s either money for exercise or money for food and my Metrocard.

5. **Healthy foods are less accessible and more expensive; unhealthy foods are always around, cheap, and filling.** Every participant discussed the ubiquitous presence of fast food outlets and the relative inaccessibility of healthy foods, particularly fresh fruit and vegetables, in low-income neighborhoods. The cost differential
between eating healthy foods and unhealthy foods, such as soda, fast food, chips, and candy, was frequently raised. Disparities in access to healthy food options were described, often with a sense of resigned frustration. Fast food outlets are a common presence in some participants’ neighborhoods. Grocery stores and bodegas, both offering limited food choices, were identified as the only convenient options available. Well-stocked and well-maintained supermarkets offering a wide variety of quality produce were not readily accessible for participants who live in low-income neighborhoods:

- In our neighborhood, there’s just pizza, fried chicken places. You have to drive outside of the neighborhood to eat well. Eating well is really hard I don’t have a car and it gets hard to pick up health food.
- Everything bad for you is cheap.
- Healthy food is expensive. It’s just cheaper to go to McDonald’s instead of picking up healthy food. Being unhealthy goes with our budget.

All participants saw the LaGuardia campus – its buildings and immediate external surroundings – as a place where healthy food options are severely limited. While some noted that healthy food choices might be available in the College’s cafeteria, they saw these as secondary in relation to the main choices, such as burgers and fries. The immediate vicinity around the college was described as devoid of healthy food options: “Around us [the LaGuardia campus], the food options are limited. In the Upper East Side, you might have healthy food options, but here it’s coffee, soda, snacks, pizza, maybe a sandwich.”

6. **Time pressures interfere with healthy eating and getting exercise.** Participants described busy schedules as a significant barrier to their ability to maintain a healthy weight. Between academic responsibilities, work, and family obligations, participants are unable to find the time to shop for and prepare healthy meals. Many consider it easier and quicker to rely on fast food or to consume ready-to-eat meals. Finding time for exercise is also compromised. Participants describe their schedules as too full, allowing no time to go to a gym or to exercise outdoors:

- We don’t have much time–school, work, and more work. I have only 30 or so minutes to eat and it takes time to cook meals. I’ll just pick up something quickly, even if it’s unhealthy.
• There’s no time to eat. I attend class and study and still have to work and do other things. There’s a really fast pace and there’s no time to eat well.

• Time for exercise is hard is just hard to find.

7. **Participants offered a range of actions the college could take to improve food choices and promote exercise.** A small number of participants thought the College had no role to play in promoting healthy eating or exercise. These few participants felt the College could only have a limited impact on people’s behaviors. But most participants strongly felt the College should foster obesity prevention initiatives. Many believed something should be done to increase the availability and promote the consumption of healthier foods. The cafeteria, seen by some as tilting more towards the selling of unhealthy foods, was the focus of many recommendations. Participants suggested that more healthy food choices be offered, while others suggested alternative on-campus sites for the sale of healthy food:

• If the cafeteria had more healthy foods, at a reasonable price, and didn’t have such a wide choice of unhealthy foods, students would buy more healthy food instead of burgers and chicken nuggets.

• People would eat healthy if healthy food was available. They choose unhealthy food by default. If the choice was there, they’d eat healthy food.

• It starts at home and stays with them. If we took away all the McDonald’s in the world, not sure it would make any difference.

    Several students recommended that classes be offered to explore the complex issues of food, culture, and the socioeconomic factors contributing to the obesity epidemic. A few students also suggested that nutrition education is needed, helping people to learn how to prepare and eat healthy foods. Given the high rate of childhood obesity, some thought that education programs to help parents make the right food choices for children would be valuable.

• Classes could bring awareness to the [obesity] issue. It’s not just you. There are other things at play. Awareness would change that. If you become more aware of food, where it comes from, it could affect your thinking and others.
• What I observe with students is ignorance. Not sure if they teach nutrition in high school. Students are completely unaware of the dangers of eating unhealthy food.
• People need to be connected to food. Why not create a community around cooking and eating?

Limitations
The findings of this study highlight directions for further exploration and may help guide future research. The small sample size, comprised mostly of females at one large, urban, community college, limits the ability to generalize the findings to the larger population of community college students. Another limitation is that no independent analysis of the data took place either through commonly used analysis tools, such as the Statistical Package for Social Sciences, nor by an independent researcher. The process of establishing criteria for data inclusion and interpretation rested solely with the researcher and may have biased the interpretation of the data. Future studies should be undertaken to confirm the findings, conclusions, and recommendations drawn from this study.

Recommendations
Given the disturbingly high rate of childhood obesity, colleges will see substantially greater numbers of students who are overweight or obese. The deep impact of the obesity epidemic compels action, but to date the focus of research and prevention activities has ignored community colleges and their untapped potential to reach millions of students, as well as faculty and staff, and the communities that they serve. Ideally positioned as trusted community institutions, and with the ability to tap vital research skills that can deepen understanding of the epidemic, two-year colleges can implement vastly needed prevention programs. This study’s findings suggest some important directions for future research and action.

A community college’s important first step in facing this vast epidemic will be appreciating the epidemic’s complexity. The adoption of one elegant solution or intervention will not be sufficient. Instead, community colleges must begin to address the “ecological niche” that individuals occupy. Colleges can learn about and influence the complex web of behavioral factors (habits, emotions, cognitions, attitudes, and
beliefs) and the environmental factors (physical, economic, and socio-cultural) that affect food intake and physical activity. Obesity interventions must also consider the cultural background and socioeconomic condition of the students. Different cultural attitudes towards obesity are widely recognized and must inform decisions regarding prevention (Sira and White). Also essential is appreciation of the economic realities that students face and the barriers these impose on accessing nutritious food and engaging in regular exercise.

An individual lives in many different environments – the family, workplace, and, for students, the college environment – all of which affect weight status. Important studies of childhood obesity locate its causes in the larger context of the family, school, and larger community environment (Davison and Birch). An alternative to addressing individual experience detached from many contributing factors, Ecological Systems Theory may prove useful in considering approaches to preventing and treating obesity in community college students.

As indicated by students interviewed for this paper, community colleges must approach the intensely personal issue of obesity delicately, with sensitivity to its complex personal, cultural, and socioeconomic dimensions. Stigma and discrimination are commonly reported; colleges need to be exceedingly careful not to exacerbate the negative attitudes that are already pervasive (Latner, Stunkard, and Wilson). Disordered thinking and behaviors about eating, including distorted body perception, binge eating, and purging are widespread among college students, particularly women (Wharton, Adams, and Hampl; Sira and White). Efforts to promote healthy eating and exercise must be approached with an acute awareness of the disturbingly high levels of disordered eating that is all too common among college students. Assigning responsibility for obesity to individuals, portraying obese people as lazy and undisciplined and using language of blame, weakness, or personal failure all undermine efforts to combat the epidemic. The evidence is overpowering: numerous studies over time have shown how today’s eating and exercise environment undermines the ability of individuals to make healthy decisions about eating and weight (Brownell et al.).

Unsurprisingly, students in the present study viewed the obesity epidemic from the perspective of its impact on children. In neighborhoods within miles of the College, one out of two school-age children are overweight or obese (Hartocollis). Combating childhood obesity
will require parental engagement. Parents play a central role in shaping eating and physical activity habits of their children. Community colleges are well-positioned to offer the programs and services which parents need to help them maintain a healthy weight and potentially engage their children in obesity prevention activities. Nutrition education, cooking classes and expanded access to recreational facilities are all worth consideration.

Interviewees also reported that incorporating physical activity into their daily routine is an enormous challenge given time pressures and the lack of availability of recreational space. Efforts to promote physical activity for busy college students might include credit-bearing courses that combine physical activity and academic work (Sailors et al.). Participants did not cite improvements in the “built environment” as a possible intervention leading to less sedentary activity. Yet an examination of the surrounding campus areas and working with local officials and organizations could lead to changes in the campus environment that motivate walking and encourage other outdoor exercise.

Frequent reference to an overwhelming presence of fast food suggests that community colleges should evaluate the college nutrition environment. Assessment tools commonly used in K–12 schools, workplaces, and childcare settings are widely available and, when adapted to college settings, provide a useful way to examine nutrition programs, policies, and food offerings (Freedman). Providing better food choices at college campuses is the subject of an important report issued by the Campaign against Diabetes of the City University of New York (CUNY) which offers a valuable direction for colleges to follow to improve food choices at their campuses. Examining the availability of healthy and unhealthy foods at CUNY campuses, the report shows significant barriers in the ability of students, faculty, and staff to obtain healthy foods at the campuses (City University of New York).

This study also points to the “busyness” and “lack of time” as significant obstacles to healthy eating and regular exercise. A similar finding was noted in a study examining the perspectives of community center workers serving children and families in a low-income Hispanic neighborhood (Chatterjee, Blakely, and Barton). The time pressures associated with balancing multiple responsibilities that include holding a job, completing academic work, and being a caregiver may impose pivotal barriers to promoting a healthier lifestyle. An analysis of the
lack of time that students have to maintain a healthy weight raises a host of socioeconomic issues that, however complicated and vast, cannot be ignored.

Exploration and possible implementation of interventions taken at four-year colleges could benefit two-year institutions. Highlighting healthy foods in cafeterias or dining halls showed some promise in leading to the purchase of healthful food (Peterson et al.; Freedman and Conners). In the present study, interviewees recommended the offering of classes that explore the complex issues surrounding food, nutrition and obesity. Such an approach may be warranted. One study of a course focused on food-related social issues led to better outcomes in healthy eating than comparison courses offered on health issues (Hekler, Gardner, and Robinson). Nutrition education in a college class may also be a viable way to assist college students in improving their diets. Class-based nutrition education has shown the potential to reduce consumption of sugar-sweetened soft drinks and increase consumption of low-fat milk (Ha et al.).

Community colleges are centers for training nurses, dieticians, physical therapists, and mental health professionals, all of whom can play instrumental roles in furthering efforts to halt the obesity epidemic. Community colleges could have a far-reaching impact by strengthening the curriculum to promote greater understanding and involvement in the prevention, care, and treatment of obesity. College health centers also are valuable venues for the dissemination of health information and can assume a pivotal role in promoting obesity prevention and assisting overweight and obese students in taking steps to lose weight (Pedersen et al.). However, there remains an essential need for more research regarding obesity in the community college setting. If we are to design ways to lessen risk factors, we must first understand the prevalence of obesity among community college students and the specific risk factors they encounter in their multiple environments.

Conclusion
College campuses have deep experience in tackling public health problems. Initiatives in reducing tobacco and illegal drug use, encouraging responsible drinking, and stemming the HIV epidemic provide important lessons in the benefits and challenges community colleges may encounter as they face the obesity epidemic. Its breadth and impact, the
vast number of current and future students affected, and its harrowing consequences for individual health, school performance, stigma and discrimination demand aggressive action. As this enormous health crisis sweeps across our neighborhoods, community colleges can either turn away or lead. Indeed, community colleges throughout their history have confronted complex problems; our very mission is to serve the well-being of our communities. Among our resources are an abundance of multi-disciplinary knowledge and diverse abilities to reach and shape the lives of millions. For the sake of our students and their futures, we must now combine mission, knowledge, and skill in taking on this most profound challenge.

Works Consulted


Talking Back to Nike

Abigail Schoneboom, Social Science

Now, it is true that the nature of society is to create, among its citizens, an illusion of safety; but it is also absolutely true that the safety is always necessarily an illusion. Artists are here to disturb the peace. (emphasis added)

James Baldwin

Introduction
In a 1961 interview with Studs Terkel, James Baldwin described art as a kind of rebellion against the “illusion of safety,” words that connect well to the concept of “culture jamming,” a form of contemporary media activism that undermines the dream world of advertising. Defined by Mark Dery as “media hacking, information warfare, terror-art, and guerrilla semiotics, all in one,” culture jamming subverts the messages of mainstream cultural institutions such as multinational corporations by “mimicking” the branding methods of highly budgeted advertising campaigns. In his book, Culture Jam: How to Reverse America’s Suicidal Consumer Binge – and Why We Must, media activist Kalle Lasn writes, “A well produced print ‘subvertisement’ mimics the look and feel of the target ad, prompting the classic double take as viewers realize what they’re seeing is the very opposite of what they expected” (131).

Lasn’s anti-consumerist magazine, Adbusters, one of the best known culture jamming entities, appropriated sophisticated Photoshop techniques to produce the famous alteration of the iconic Calvin Klein “Obsession” perfume advertisement. Redirecting the message to draw attention to the fashion industry’s promotion of excessive thinness, the Adbusters “Obsession Women” subvert shows the emaciated back of a bulimic woman hunched over a toilet bowl (“Spoof Ads: Fashion”). Another subvert strikingly critiques the sweatshop practices of globalized labor by depicting a sleek black sneaker over which is scrawled “NIKE $2.50/ SWEATSHOP 83¢” (“Stop NIKE”).

Drawing visual attention to conditions of income inequality, environmental destruction, and overconsumption, Adbusters spurs critical
reflection upon global capitalism and its effects. As a form of guerrilla
art, culture jamming can sometimes be playful; yet its intention is
to identify unsustainable and inequitable economic practices. In my
teaching of sociology, I draw on a definition of sustainability which,
emphasizing inter- and intragenerational equity in the social as well as
environmental spheres, stresses the interconnectedness of ecological and
human concerns (Meadows et al.; Meadows, Meadows, and Randers).
Within sociology, the concept of sustainability is integral to critical
perspectives that link capitalism to increasing global inequality and an
impending ecological crisis (Harvey; Hardt, and Negri). As Molotch
argues, in order to remain competitive, large companies have embraced
a “make nothing, control everything” agenda, outsourcing production
to developing countries where labor and environmental protections are
minimal and abuses common. In my introductory sociology course,
we examine how companies manage their identities and production
methods in order to mask unsustainable production practices; we look
in particular at Indonesian and Indian sweatshops¹ that produce goods
for Nike and the Gap. We also reflect on gendered interaction with the
market, reflecting on the role of consumerism in consigning women to
subordinate roles and in distracting us from questioning the human and
ecological cost of the goods we consume.

Culture jamming’s visual provocations lend relevance and immediacy
to abstract concepts, overlapping neatly with a variety of disciplinary
themes. One of my broad goals as a teacher of sociology is to
develop in my students an understanding of themselves as social actors
capable of change, disturbers of the peace who can use their knowledge
of sociology to analyze and question contexts of power and culture.
While planning my classes in the summer of 2009, I began to consider
culture jamming as a method of stimulating classroom engagement,
one that would encourage an active grasp of basic sociological concepts
such as exploited labor, profit incentive, and gender socialization. Tar-
geting immediately recognizable brands and symbols to hack, culture
jamming could also prompt students to articulate the values and ethi-
cal decisions underlying the popular products they consume. Culture
jamming presented itself as a way to “talk back” to a proliferation of
advertising images; by creating their own altered images, students could
step out of positions of culture consumers to become culture producers.
In what follows, I describe the process of integrating culture jamming
into sociology course content. Referring to examples of student work, I critically evaluate its pedagogical effectiveness in aiding the application of sociology concepts to contemporary culture and personal life.

The Cluster and the Course
Part of a first-year Liberal Arts cluster entitled “Sex Wars: Sexuality, Power, and Culture in a Global Context,” my Fall 2009 Introduction to Sociology course (SSS100) was offered to students in conjunction with two English courses, taught by a single English instructor – English Composition I (ENG101) and The Research Paper (ENG103) – and a history course on The Politics of Sexuality (SSN210). In keeping with the structure of most learning communities, the content of the courses was thematically linked. As is also typical of most learning communities, the three collaborating faculty members approached readings and other materials from our distinct disciplinary constructs. For example, I designed my syllabus to address the sociological concept of capitalist exploitation as articulated by Marx, examining particular instances of sweatshop labor and female gender socialization. My class explored the former in terms of such realities as the hired gangsters who harass factory workers when they try to organize, and the latter in relation to women’s roles as underpaid producers and insecure consumers. My selection of course materials included readings in classic and contemporary primary texts and recent newspaper articles, several short films, and fact sheets based on materials from textbooks.

During the segment on sweatshops, students compared Marx’s description in Capital of the prevalence of child labor and deplorable working conditions in Victorian factories to “Behind the Swoosh” (Keady), a contemporary documentary film investigation of Nike’s Indonesian factories. The goal was to convey to students the idea that labor exploitation is a continuous, rather than an historical, feature of capitalism. The film highlights the company’s illegal practices of dumping and burning waste rubber and plastic near the residential areas where children play, the low wages that require workers to put in significant amounts of overtime in order to subsist, and the sometimes brutal intimidation of workers who try to form unions. Students also discussed articles about the Gap’s continued use of child labor: one article exposes a Gap subcontractor in New Delhi where “slave” children work 16- to 20-hour shifts embroidering clothes in an unventilated
and polluted backstreet factory (McDougall, “Child Sweatshop”) and others demonstrate how such exposure helps ameliorate shameful conditions (McDougall, “Gap Plans”; Lawrence). In class, we compared the contemporary readings and documentary footage with Marx’s vivid description of nineteenth-century factories, where boys of eight and nine commonly worked 15-hour shifts, sometimes being fed at the machines (Chap. X). Citing Employment Commission reports, Marx listed the diseases suffered by workers in the pottery and match-making industries, attributed by surgeons of the day to long hours and chemical exposure (Chap. X). Surprised to learn of the parallels between Victorian and contemporary production methods, students discussed in class how these “truths” have been effectively hidden by advertising and branding campaigns.

Similarly, in their exploration of gender socialization processes, students read an excerpt from Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* that offers an analysis of the ways in which qualities associated with femininity are social constructs, rather than innate properties of the female sex. In class, I juxtaposed de Beauvoir’s text with an episode of *I Dream of Jeannie*, the second-most watched show on television in the sixties (and still aired in reruns). In the episode, Jeannie reads a magazine article on how to be a modern American woman and tries to follow its advice, using her attractiveness to persuade Major Nelson to pay for a new wardrobe, refusing to do the cooking or housework, and getting a job in a department store, then requiring rescue by Nelson when her magic powers create a furor among the customers (“Americanization”). Roughly contemporary with *The Second Sex*, the assigned episode explores the relationship between feminine sexuality and economic power, emphasizing the centrality of magazine culture and shopping in prescribing female identity. As with the sweatshop theme, I encouraged students to make a connection between these “historical” artifacts and contemporary society, discussing student interactions with fashion and lifestyle magazines. Connecting Marx and de Beauvoir, we discussed the profit incentive as a driving force behind some of the pressures placed on young women (and, increasingly, on men), stimulating overconsumption, creating unfulfilled needs, and conveying an illusory and distracting sense of power.
Culture Jamming Project
Process, Content, and Goals
My students generally execute some kind of class project worth around 30% of the class grade. Approximately one of the three hours of class time per week is usually devoted to the project. This pre-existing structure made it relatively easy to introduce culture jamming into the syllabus. For the duration of the semester, the project hour was devoted to learning about culture jamming, examining texts and images about this form of activism, acquiring the necessary graphic design skills, and executing individual projects in Photoshop. Having received Photoshop instruction and chosen a theme2, each student was required to produce a culture-jammed 8.5”x 11” poster accompanied by a one-page brief that explained their motivation, tied together course concepts, and described their creative process. On the final day of class, students shared their images and briefs with the class as part of a poster session.

With Marx and de Beauvoir laying the foundation for a critique of contemporary labor practices and gender socialization processes, students were prepared to undertake culture jamming projects, selecting issues of particular importance to them. To introduce the concept of culture jamming in some theoretical depth, I assigned Christine Harold’s article in which she describes the practice and reflects critically on its ability to disrupt the sales pitches of corporate brands such as Nike and Camel. Drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, Harold argues that “the proliferation of the rhetoric of consumerism, in part, marks [a] shift from discipline to control” (194), underscoring the role of the advertising industry in masking exploitation and oppression. While individuals are now ostensibly granted increasing autonomy in the workplace, and are able, via the Internet, to access ever greater amounts of information, human experiences are nevertheless “managed” by an elaborate cultural apparatus that projects carefully crafted brand identities and corporate ideologies. I hoped that, in reading the article, students would grasp the subtlety of social control as a distinguishing feature of contemporary capitalism, perhaps being able to reflect on how this mechanism plays out in their own lives.

Several goals guided the integration of culture jamming into the sociology syllabus. First, the project required students to connect sociological concepts to contemporary culture and personal experience. Second, it prompted a visual approach to learning, drawing in students
with more advanced computer skills, and exposing all to cutting-edge technical skills. As mentioned earlier, intrinsic to the power of culture jamming is the appropriation of corporate communication techniques such as Photoshop to mimic the look and feel of highly budgeted advertisements. In their posters and briefs, students exploited Photoshop’s capacity to alter images and applied the concepts of Marx and de Beauvoir to their critiques of the messages of advertising. Finally, sharing their “products” with classmates, students could experience their work as forms of creative “capital,” directly participating in the production of multimedia images that could potentially be broadcast to a wider audience.

**Examples of Student Projects**

This section highlights several successful culture jamming projects, and illustrates the degree to which students were able to achieve some of the assignment’s goals. Student work varied greatly in quality; possible causes of incomplete or inadequate student work are detailed later in this paper.

As stated above, a unifying goal of the project was the successful synthesis of sociological concepts and contemporary culture, and, as a result, the realization of the everyday relevance of sociological scholarship. Using Photoshop’s filters and text tools, Samantha modified a Gap T-shirt advertisement to raise questions about the company’s manufacturing practices. The original ad, which featured the prominent slogan “Can a T-Shirt change the world?” and a T-shirt-clad man curling his muscular bicep, was part of the Gap’s fundraising campaign for African AIDS prevention. Samantha modified the image to create a broken, burned-out effect, also inscribing the model’s arms and torso with information from news articles on the Gap’s use of child labor. This text was small and somewhat distorted, requiring the viewer to examine the image closely in order to read it. In the accompanying brief, Samantha commented on the continuity between the working conditions described in Marx’s writings and those of contemporary sweatshops, and discussed the contradiction between the public image of the Gap as a socially conscious brand and its profit-maximizing strategies that lead to child exploitation. She also reflected on her effort to represent graphically the hidden reality behind the Gap brand, using distorted text to symbolise the company’s obfuscation of the truth and...
the need for closer examination by consumers. Detecting a dimension of hypocrisy within corporate philanthropy, Samantha’s critique draws attention to the clothing industry as a business in which contradictions are made invisible by slick marketing.

Connecting course material to her mother’s experience as a low-wage garment worker in New York City, Janelle focused on the issue of sweatshop labor. In her project brief, she reflected on her mother’s working conditions, “I don’t think it’s fair that she works 10 hours a day, 7 days a week and gets paid only $200 weekly.” Janelle sees a continuum of exploitation between her mother’s situation in the United States and labor conditions in India and Indonesia and she is critical of the Gap and Nike: “If they’re so successful, then why can’t they pay their workers better? Why can’t they give them better working conditions?” Her poster features clothing company logos and the slogan “Made by Slaves for Free People” set against an image of women working in sweatshop conditions in a developing country. Janelle’s project validates her life experience of growing up in economically straitened circumstances in New York City, while also helping her to see her mother’s struggle as part of a larger system of exploitation resulting from clothing firms’ need to maximize profit, rather than as an individual shortcoming. By sharing this story, Janelle helped her classmates to see how global exploitation of garment workers plays out in the New York City labor market, explaining how competition with underpaid workers in developing countries decreased her mother’s negotiating power and made her family economically vulnerable.

Many posters reflected interest in themes related to female socialization and body image. For example, Zaynep’s poster, “Victoria’s Reality, Not Secret,” was inspired by the pressure she feels from magazines to live up to unrealistic standards. She wrote, “I am affected by these images of women ... if there were more ads where women were portrayed in larger clothing sizes, I don’t think we would face as many problems as we do.” A capable and focused student, Zaynep created a professional-looking Photoshop image inspired by Victoria’s Secret lingerie advertisements: “My project is called Victoria’s Reality, meaning that it’s a reality to have meat on your body.” Her poster shows a “plus size” woman in a bathing suit, adorned with white wings and set against an attractive starry background. The poster text stresses Zaynep’s belief that women of all sizes should be able to feel proud
of their bodies. The accompanying project brief makes connections to de Beauvoir and the vulnerability of women to media-driven notions of perfection, which lock them into consumer practices in the pursuit of elusive “fixes.” Also referring to readings on female sexuality from one of the other cluster courses, Zaynep felt that this project had inspired her to think about alternative and positive visions for women whose bodies do not conform to stereotypical ideals of the female form.

The lab sessions communicated a playfulness and openness that energized the class. One academically talented student, Veronica, saw the project as a way to expose her more light-hearted side; her work was fun and relatively simple, yet spoke to a serious concern about female body image. Modifying a magazine cover girl with Photoshop’s simple paint effects, she blacked out one of the model’s teeth and adorned her face with pink, black, and yellow spots, creating a cheeky and striking image in a style suggestive of guerrilla-style graffiti. “By making the image imperfect,” she writes, “I am trying to convey the message that beauty is within. Just because you don’t have perfect skin or perfect teeth does not mean you’re not beautiful.” The more visually inclined learners responded to the project’s lab sessions with increased engagement, as did those students with advanced computer skills. Starting out with a DKNY lingerie ad, George used the liquify filter to exaggerate the model’s thinness, creating an undernourished and elongated appearance that expressed his concern that the fashion industry tacitly promotes eating disorders. Most important, George went beyond the class training sessions to research additional YouTube Photoshop techniques that he later demonstrated to the class, an opportunity that allowed him to shine before his peers.

Overall, the culture jamming projects reflected critical interaction with advertising images; drawing on course readings, video resources, and their personal experiences, the students’ posters and briefs pointed to and analyzed aspects of clothing production that are usually hidden by corporate branding campaigns. Their altered images expressed – often with a sense of humor – the contradiction between corporate claims to social responsibility or self-fulfillment and the dehumanizing logic of profit maximization. While some students critiqued processes at the manufacturing level, others engaged with the role of the market in intensifying the insecurities of young adults, in both cases making
connection to their own experiences and wielding powerful design tools to respond to the advertising that surrounds them.

Evaluation of Culture Jamming
The culture jamming activity had a number of pedagogical advantages: It encouraged student engagement in the classroom, it helped students understand product image as a construct that is removed from harsh social realities yet capable of powerfully impacting social life, and it empowered them as critical actors using a slick digital medium. Through the project, they were able to apply sociological concepts, whether trying to look at the familiar and accepted with a critical eye or taking up specific ideas such as capital’s inherent need to minimize production costs. The hands-on Photoshop training and project work addressed some attention issues that existed among the twenty-eight students, sixteen of whom were in their first semester of college. It has been my experience that students who spend over ten hours together each week in a Liberal Arts cluster often become emotionally involved and increasingly distracted as the semester progresses. Engaging in a hands-on project with a tangible outcome refocused their attention and energy, while encouraging appropriate levels of peer support and mentoring activity. The visual rather than text-based medium facilitated sharing and collaboration; students were enthusiastic about working together to solve technical problems and sharing their newly acquired skills during the lab hour.

The acquisition of Photoshop skills used in the design industry also had a certain cachet: Students learned a useful professional skill and obtained “insider” knowledge about how advertising images are manipulated. Several students showed their interest in the assignment by contributing Photoshop-related news articles and, as noted earlier, online tutorials that they had discovered outside of class time. During the training sessions, students were impressed by the professional quality of the effects they were able to generate using “makeover” techniques such as airbrushing. In many cases, this sense of empowerment carried over into their individual projects.

In general, the project was an effective vehicle for transmitting the concepts of social construction and agency that are central to an introductory sociology class. I found that the experience of culture jamming provided rich examples with which to illustrate abstract ideas
during lectures and class discussions. The application of airbrushing and reshaping used routinely in corporate advertising images rendered media distortion visible and concrete, and heightened awareness that our culture, even our sense of beauty, is dictated by powerful social forces. The ability to use these techniques to enter a critical dialogue with the media encouraged students to see themselves as social actors, capable of shifting or influencing culture. As a means of using corporate industry’s tactics against itself, culture jamming calls forth reflection on the possibilities of subversive humor and effective activism.

Despite these advantages, the culture jamming project raised a number of technological challenges and pedagogical concerns. First, Photoshop is a professional software tool that is not commonly installed in college labs and is differentially available to students outside of class. LaGuardia students often face severe economic challenges, and it is not uncommon for a student to lack access to a home computer. For those who do have a computer, Photoshop is expensive, costing around $200 for an educational user license. However, it is available as a free thirty-day download, and students were advised of this option as an alternative way of working on their projects outside of class time. Unfortunately, requiring the use of such software for a class project may have created an incentive for students to seek illegal or unauthorized Photoshop downloads, potentially placing themselves at risk of legal repercussions from software vendors. Undoubtedly, students who were able to work on the project in Photoshop outside of the classroom had an advantage. Addressing the imbalance of opportunity among students of unequal means, I required everyone to report on the resources of time and technology that had supported the execution of their projects. When it was evident that the student could not work on the project outside of class time, I adjusted assessment of image quality and sophistication accordingly.

Although most students seemed comfortable with the Photoshop training, some were overwhelmed by the challenge of creating their own project and did not complete a poster in the allotted time. As a solution, I introduced the option of creating a traditional paper collage as a substitute for a Photoshop poster. While relieving the anxiety of some students, this option may have resulted in inefficient use of lab time by others. Nevertheless, 60% of the class managed to produce a poster using Photoshop.
The problem of distraction among some cluster students continued during the training sessions and the time set aside for individual project work. It was clear, too, that some students used the lab hour for work that should have been completed outside of class. Yet the inability of some students to complete the project must be attributed to the challenge of learning to use Photoshop within the space of a semester. Staging take-home assignments during the early part of the semester could provide a partial solution to this challenge; they would have the benefit of requiring students to start collecting images and sketching out ideas outside of class so that they could use lab time more efficiently.

While open to many creative interpretations, culture jamming is attached to the specific practice of using the tools of the advertising industry against itself. In this sense, it can be thought of as a sort of Tai Chi approach to activism, one that absorbs the opponent’s energy in order to defeat its oppressive force. Most students grasped this idea very well; others retreated into simple negation, (e.g., Don’t Buy Nike! or End Sweatshop Labor!), and lost touch with the need to address the audience with the industry’s smooth, persuasive rhetoric.

Perhaps comprehension of the concept of culture jamming would have been better facilitated in my class by a selection of different reading and writing assignments. For example, although the Harold article provides a thorough overview of culture jamming, as well as a sound and subtle critique of the practice, its theoretical language was unfamiliar and confusing to most readers in my class. One solution would be to stage reading and writing assignments. If carefully matched in level of complexity, staged reading and writing activities could encourage student progress toward making substantive and integrated connections among sociological theories and concepts, and help them to write briefs that support poster presentations more concretely. For example, the Harold article explains the difference between forms of protest that employ oppositional logic versus techniques that subvert or challenge powerful institutions through appropriation and strategic imitation. However, the language used in this part of the article is somewhat dense and challenging and students tended to skim the more difficult passages. A closer reading of the article would have helped students to understand culture jamming as an action that goes beyond simple negation of the rhetoric of advertising (Don’t Buy Nike!) to both borrow its tools and critique its effects.
Difficulties with the readings may also have contributed to the weakness that characterized the quality of the writing in the briefs that were meant to integrate the images the students created, personal experience, and sociological theory. While students were adept at connecting their projects, their personal lives, and the concepts covered in class discussions, the written integration of the excerpts from Marx and de Beauvoir tended to be underdeveloped and weakly articulated, with many students limiting themselves to vague allusions to video resources such as Behind the Swoosh. Again, careful staging of reading and writing assignments would strengthen student abilities to connect theory to practice and to articulate these connections in their writing.

While the culture jamming project encountered challenges to academic skill and disciplinary background cited above, it succeeded in helping students think about the products they consume as part of complex social structures affected by notions of power, profit, and identity. As illustrated by the student examples above, many projects and briefs exhibited a sharpened sensitivity to the global inequality behind contemporary consumer culture and an understanding of sustainability that encompasses ethical and social as well as ecological concerns.

In particular, the projects reflected on how advertising shapes our perceptions of ourselves and of the products we consume, shielding companies against uncomfortable questions about the wider social and environmental costs of the goods they sell. As I refine this approach in future semesters, I hope to offer students the opportunity to mimic more closely the advertising model by broadcasting their work to a wider audience through a college wall display or via the Internet. In spite of the concerns and challenges raised, the culture jamming projects succeeded in engaging students with social issues and developing their potential to be more critical and ethical consumers, “disturbers of the peace,” who are able to contribute actively to building a sustainable society.
NOTES

1. “There are several different ways to define a sweatshop. According to the US Department of Labor, a sweatshop is any factory that violates more than one of the fundamental US labor laws, which include paying a minimum wage and keeping a time card, paying overtime, and paying on time. The Union of Needletrades Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE), the US garment workers union, says any factory that does not respect workers’ right to organize an independent union is a sweatshop. Global Exchange and other corporate accountability groups in the anti-sweatshop movement would add to this definition any factory that does not pay its workers a living wage – that is, a wage that can support the basic needs of a small family.” (“Frequently”)

2. I broke down the available time to allow approximately four hours for Photoshop instruction and seven hours for in-class project work. During the training sessions, students learned how to work with layers; use the airbrush, text, blur, and eyedropper tools; apply filters; and scale images to the required dimensions. Students scanned in images from magazines or used the Google search engine to locate images that they wished to “jam,” and modified these images using Photoshop in a way that reflected one of the themes covered in class.

Although I was well equipped to teach the necessary technical skills (I had previously worked as a Web designer and have taught introductory courses in graphic design), acquiring an appropriate lab required a degree of luck. Photoshop is relatively “high-end” software and is available in only a few specialized labs on campus that are generally used by photography and media students. However, with the assistance of LaGuardia’s Information Technology staff, I was able to take advantage of a rare open slot and secure the use of one of these labs for one hour per week.

3. Photoshop is such a sophisticated, full-featured tool that it is easy to take a wrong turn, and students often became temporarily confused or stuck. I was able to move around the lab resolving problems and, as mentioned earlier, technically proficient students provided guidance to slower ones, but this assistance was insufficient to bring everyone’s project to completion during the available lab hours.

WORKS CONSULTED


Open Your Eyes

Scott Sternbach, Humanities

Be still with yourself until the object of your attention affirms your presence.
Minor White

Toward the end of the seventies, I had the good fortune to study at the New School for Social Research under Lisette Model, the great Viennese émigré photographer and master teacher. My memories of those classes are still vivid; it was there that I learned so much about being a photographer and a teacher. One day Model stood before a photograph I had submitted for art critique, an image of a woman in a doorway. “Almost, Scott,” she said. “You almost got it.” As she spoke, she struck her fist against her stomach; for Model, strong images had visceral force. Years later, teaching students how “to get it” is what I most want to accomplish in my own photography courses. To that end, we practice Model’s two fundamental aesthetic principles. First, a photographer must be fearless; second, the photograph must “strike the gut.”

While I was learning to be fearless at the New School, the photographs of Minor White, Model’s contemporary, were teaching me to be still. Model was a realist; her stark and energetic subjects immediately recognizable as human beings. The mystically inclined White was her stylistic opposite, his images cropped to “obliterate clues to size and geographic locale” (Rosenblum 519). Yet both taught me to see into my subject, to be present to and respectful of the world before my eyes, and to use the camera to detect the essence of what I see. Their influence continues in my pedagogy, which is rooted in transforming the act of seeing into photographic expression. The following discussion describes the four primary components of my Introduction to Photojournalism (HUN191) course: history and theory of photography, the field trip, instruction in technique, and the art critique, that moment when the work of the student photographer is presented to the class for commentary.

In all phases of instruction, my objective is to engage, in the words of Lee Shulman, “habits of mind, habits of hand, and habits of
heart” (52). This paper emphasizes the interdependence of the field trip and art critique as the signature pedagogy of my studio photography class. The final section of the paper is an analysis of student photographs taken during field trips as diverse as Newtown Creek, Coney Island, and Queens. The photographers went out into the world to capture their images, and they brought them back to the studio to share with a community of peers. Their work reflects the degree to which they were fearless and attuned, the degree to which they “got it.”

**The Pedagogy of Photography**

*History, Theory, and Practice*

Far from seeing photography as a potential rival to painting, Delacroix took a keen interest in the development of this new medium.

*(Art Knowledge News)*

Photographers, you will never become artists. All you are is mere copiers!

*(Charles Baudelaire, qtd. in Le Brun 20)*

The traditional pedagogies associated with teaching and assessing the quality of a photographic image have evolved since the end of the nineteenth century, when photography – embraced by Delacroix, decried by Baudelaire – won acceptance as a form of artistic expression. However, for the majority of photographers of the period, artistic expression meant altering the look of the image by texturing its surface to more closely imitate Impressionist painting. Peter Henry Emerson broke from the photography as painting trend in the belief that a photographer was an artist only when shooting in the naturalistic style. In his view, the photographic image was not to be manipulated to mimic painting; rather nature was to be captured through purely photographic means, for example, through selective use of focus and careful consideration of the time of day and quality of light.

In *Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art*, a revolutionary treatise on the pedagogy of photography published in 1890, Emerson states his intention to approach photography from an “artistic standpoint,” with as little written instruction in art as possible and “only
enough science to lead to a comprehension of the principles which we adduce for our arguments for naturalistic photography.” Trained in medicine, he abandoned it to pursue photography. Rejecting textbooks and the studio, Emerson took his inspiration and instruction from nature, the expression of individual feeling, and “practice alone”(8). These were the forces to shape photographic art. Quoting Keats in the frontispiece of his book, Emerson elevates photography to the realm of the high arts, and asserts his own identification with the Romantic aesthetic: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

Is Emerson also imploring his students to seek a life of spiritual existence? Perhaps. But more important, his promotion of photography as a fine art in its own right opened the way for the Photo-Succession Movement founded by Alfred Stieglitz just a decade or so after Emerson published his book. During an intensely meditative period in his life and work, Stieglitz opened The Intimate Gallery in New York City, where, in 1925, he began to show images from his Equivalent Series photographs of clouds taken near his summer home on Lake George (American). Reviewing 171 “exquisite examples” of Stieglitz’s work exhibited at Washington’s National Gallery, the art critic Andy Grunberg describes the Equivalent series as the “most radical demonstration of faith in the existence of a reality behind and beyond that offered by the world of appearances. They are intended to function evocatively, like music, and they express a desire to leave behind the physical world.” One need not respond quite as strongly as Grunberg to appreciate in Stieglitz a deeply personal inward exploration that transformed the possibilities of the photographic image. Shifting it away from the purely representational, Stieglitz moved photography toward the abstractions of modern art.

Stieglitz’s spiritual aesthetic, embodying and transcending nature, influenced a range of artists, among them Edward Steichen, Georgia O’Keefe, and Minor White. In 1945, just out of the army, and twenty years after Stieglitz introduced Equivalent, White studied at Columbia University under the acclaimed Meyer Schapiro, the extraordinarily gifted teacher and theorist of aesthetics famous for his inspired psychological readings of modern art. White also worked at MoMA, which brought him into contact with the photographers Harry Callahan, Paul Strand, and Stieglitz himself, whose evocative approach White
recognized as “a way of learning to use the camera in relation to the mind, heart, viscera and spirit of human beings.” Describing Stieglitz’s technique of “equivalence,” White defined it as favoring “an object or series of forms that, when photographed, would yield an image with specific suggestive powers that can direct the viewer into a specific and known feeling, state, or place within himself” (19).

The dictum of Stieglitz that the object is mood influenced White as artist, founder and editor of Aperture, and teacher, a career that he pursued across America until his death in 1976. Of the dozen or so schools of photography that sprang up between 1940 and 1960 in America, White was associated as a student or teacher with about half. White taught in photography workshops in Portland, Oregon, and, with Ansel Adams, established the country’s first department of fine arts photography at the California Institute of Fine Arts (renamed the San Francisco Art Institute in 1961), where he taught from 1946 to 1953. Returning east, he was in residence at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) for several years until joining the faculty at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he remained until his death (Coderre).

Along with his contemporary Lisette Model, White is considered among the great teachers of photography. Both are credited with inspiring a generation of photographers, despite teaching styles as polarized as their aesthetics. The photographer Jerry Rice describes these contrasts in a series of lively podcasts made for the New York Institute of Photography (NYIP). A student of White’s at RIT, Rice later studied at the New School under Model, whose protégés also included Diane Arbus and Larry Fink. Rice remembers the short, sophisticated Model, a speaker of three or four languages and formerly a music student of Arnold Schönberg, as capable of “reducing a student to tears,” during critique sessions: “Darling, you are beautiful, but your picture is terrible, really terrible” (NYIP, “Photography”). On the other hand, White was “tolerant of the world that was not his world... He did not say anything because he did not want to influence you. He wanted you to find out what it was about” (NYIP, “Jerry”).

A tall Minnesotan, White (“he always wore a spotless shirt, white, like his name”) approached the inner feelings of the student through meditation, yoga, and “Zone Buddhism,” a mashup of Ansel Adam’s photographic technique of controlling tones of light and dark and White’s own Zen tendencies. Poetic, Buddhist, gay, and avant-garde,
White stood out in Rochester. His students were, for the most part, straight, white, and male, many just back from the Korean War; a few were photojournalists. "Many times the students just sat in class in puzzlement," remembers Rice. His conversation with NYIP Dean Chuck Delany is illuminating, for teachers especially, and is worth reading at length:

Jerry Rice: Except when he was teaching the zone system, he didn’t specifically say "These are the facts that you will learn, and here’s how you apply them...This is the conclusion that you should come up with." He taught by showing you other pictures, his own and works of other great photographers. He’d ask you to explore your own psyche through photography. Many times you didn’t exactly, I mean, the students would sometimes sit there in class and turning and looking to each other in puzzlement as to what was the class all about, and not very many people had good answers to this. He was very much interested in Zen Buddhism and also a number of other mental studies, so to speak. And he was using that approach to try to have you look at photography and understand yourself through other people’s photographs and through your own photographs. .... For instance, he would put a photograph up on an easel, and he was a great believer in meditation. So we all meditated for about a half an hour. Nothing was being said. And he had us do it with our eyes closed and then we’d suddenly open our eyes and look at the picture, and then tell each other what we thought was there. I had never encountered teaching like this before. I mean it was very unstructured and very hard. ...I know he had to write a lesson plan because the college required one, as they do of every faculty member. But any resemblance between the lesson plan and what went on there was purely coincidental. ...I learned a lot from him, but I don’t think I could pinpoint this in terms of specifics.

Interviewer: How did he tell you, “Now it is time to open your eyes”? What did he say?
Rice: He’d just say, “Open your eyes.” That’s all. And the photograph would be on the easel, one photograph at a time. He would never show more than one photograph at a time. And he would keep it up for a certain period of time. When he felt that you had absorbed what could be there, he removed it...

Interviewer: So, you’d open your eyes and there’s a photograph there. Does he say anything?
Rice: No.
Interviewer: (Laughs) I want to teach like this.

Whether the Zen meditative awareness of White or Model’s “in your gut” confrontation, both styles are passionate, and both teachers were dedicated to encouraging the inner evolution of mindful and holistic photographers. As I show below, my teaching practice, influenced by Model and White, combines field trips with the traditions of art critique. Over time, I have discovered that the potential of the student photographer is best engaged by situations that call forth humility and respect, and require inquiry into the ways aesthetic meaning is made and expressed.

Seeing in the Field

I seek out places where it can happen more readily, such as deserts or mountains or solitary areas, or by myself with a seashell, and while I’m there get into states of mind where I’m more open than usual. I’m waiting, I’m listening. I go to those places and get myself ready through meditation. Through being quiet and willing to wait, I can begin to see the inner man and the essence of the subject in front of me. (Minor White, Photoquotes)

The Western Catskill Mountains of upstate New York lie only three hours away from Queens, but the gap in lifestyles, religious practices, beliefs, and terrain is far greater than a small distance in miles and time. About ten years ago, I began to take my Introduction to Photojournalism students to the western Catskills where small farms, threatened by the vast production of agri-business, fight to survive. I entered the world of the farming community in 1998 with Delaware County
In Transit

Line, my series of photographs that documents the region, the work of farmers, their families, and their daily lives (Sternbach). Over time, my relationships with these Catskill residents have grown into trusting and respectful friendships that allow me to bring students to their farms to talk and photograph freely (Figures 1, 2, and 3).

After the students coordinate the travel logistics, we set out for the Catskills early in the morning. Upon arrival, they take the first steps in creating a group multimedia project that will depict the daily activity of a small family farm. Split into two groups, some students decide to focus on the farm’s human element, its owners, the workers, the deliverer of seed, the family and friends who drop by; others choose the environment as a subject - the trees, sheep, goats, and chickens, or the design of barns and local architecture. With the fundamentals of photojournalism in mind, students keep notes on their surroundings, asking questions and recording information and impressions in their journals and photographs, preparing to later share the significance of their observations. Here in the field, in the midst of a disappearing culture, students learn that the art of photography is more than snapping pictures.

Throughout the day, each student must make a number of decisions, and solve a variety of problems related to setting up the image. Removed from their comfort zones and in direct observation of the environment, aspiring photographers are required to select, frame, and shoot images that they will later edit, refine, and present in art critique for evaluation by their peers. As there are many ways to frame and expose an image, photographers need to learn to make decisions on the spot. Should they use a tripod? Where will the focus fall? How much distance should be between photographer and subject? Should the point of view come from the perspective of a worm or that of a bird? When will the shutter be depressed? How much light is needed to expose the image properly? Students must also consider how to engage with the subject and determine the interaction most appropriate to achieve the evocative moment. Should their approach be passive or aggressive, silent or chatty? Do they possess the fearless quality that allows a “stepping up” to the subject to make an image that “strikes the gut”? And can they practice the patience of Minor White, as they learn, methodically and slowly, to capture the subject’s most subtle and concrete detail?
Fig. 1 – Donna Champlin sharing thoughts with LaGuardia photography students
Delaware County, New York
2007 Scott Sternbach

Fig. 2 – Ana Colorado, LaGuardia photography student
Whiskey Hollow Road
Delaware County, New York
2007 Scott Sternbach
Fig. 3 – Donna Champlin
Dairy Farmer
Delaware County, New York
2004 Scott Sternbach
Fig. 4 – My Mom with Her Daily Lupus Medication.
Brooklyn, New York
2007 Jessica Hofmann
Fig. 5 – 127th Avenue and 172nd Street
St. Albans, New York 11434
Homero Campos

Fig. 6 – Scott Sternbach on Hermit Island
Antarctic Peninsula
2008 Homero Campos
Seeing the Subject

The Large Format Camera as Contemplative Technique

Minor White’s meditative use of the camera has inspired me to use the techniques of large format photography to teach students to be contemplative practitioners of their craft. Several characteristics distinguish large format photography, among them greater control of depth of field, especially important to portrait and landscape photography. To teach the importance of creating an intimate relation with subjects, in the Catskills I introduce the use of an old-fashioned large format or view camera, its leather bellows, dark cloth, wooden box, and ground glass drawing the photographer back to the first century of photographic art (Figure 6). Rather than looking through the viewfinder of the handheld small or medium format camera, my students step under the cloth and focus the subject upon the ground glass, a time-consuming process that renders a clear, sharp image viewed upside down and backwards. Composing the image in this way brings students closer to essential aesthetic elements of composition and form, key components of a strong image.

Unlike the fast “point and shoot” rhythm of digital cameras, the traditional large format camera must be set up and balanced on a tripod, and the film must be loaded into sheet film holders, steps that also slow down the act of picture taking. Finally, a smaller camera can be held in front of the eyes like a mask; the large format requires the photographer to step out from under the cloth to face the human figure or natural landscape. Although most students do not own a large format camera, learning to use it teaches them to be more attentive to what and how they see, behaviors that carry over into their smaller format landscape or portrait photography.

Seeing the Work

The Art Critique

The art critique session, like the large format camera, slows down the way photographers approach the image. Critique sessions explore the ways photographers think, devoting time for reflection upon the problems, solutions, and decisions related to practical, ethical, and aesthetic aspects of the image. For example, student photographers must decide which subjects to shoot and where to display the finished image; they must resolve technical problems; and they must learn to articulate aesthetic evaluations and ethical considerations in clear, concrete, and
Those who wish to pursue careers in photography will confront an extremely competitive field, as students in the senior level of college or, later, in graduate school, or as professional photographers. In any of these roles, they will be called upon to speak clearly and to write thoughtful papers, applications, and grant proposals; they will create web content and perhaps books. Finally, if the aspiring photographer wishes to gain the trust of subjects and professional colleagues, he or she will need to communicate thoughtfully in complex ways.

In my class, students practice communication skills through a series of low and high stakes writing assignments, oral presentations, and open critique. Prior to the critique sessions, students are introduced to a rubric that guides the process of critical review of the photographic image. When analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of their work and the work of their peers, students must refer to the rubric. Designed to complement experience in the field, critique sessions are usually divided into two parts, the first of which begins in silence, with fifteen minutes of journal writing that I read and comment upon later. During this time, students focus on their identities as photographers, assuming the photographer’s perspective, and reflecting upon any aspect of the art that comes to mind – personal projects, their lives as artists, career aspirations and challenges, and the work of peers.

Grounded in the traditions of the art critique, the second part of the session introduces and reinforces critical vocabulary, the application or questioning of aesthetic standards, and strengthens the orientation and expression of individual style. The room is darkened, except for a single spotlight over a table upon which student work has been laid out. The seemingly small adjustment of lowering lights and spotlighting work minimizes the usual classroom distractions and focuses observations. As students walk around the table to study the pictures, a volunteer chooses an image that he or she finds compelling or evocative and comments upon the photograph’s strengths and weaknesses.

Students quickly learn that evaluations of “nice,” “good,” and “I like it” are discouraged. The rubric facilitates class discussion about aesthetic choice of subject, technique, and location. Breaking the image into compositional elements, students discover the photograph’s power or problems. Assigning the photographs to genres, they learn to identify generic elements, and they learn that some images belong to many genres at once and others to none at all. In their commentary, students
distinguish among the textures of paper, as well as the tones – warm, neutral or cool – most appropriate to an image. Is the contrast sharp? Is the image well-exposed, well-framed, or is it flat or oddly placed? Is its composition classical or modern? Students consider the lighting of a photograph, its development process, and where an image might be used or exhibited. Students must arrive at the “why” of a picture, and they must ask about the feeling it expresses. Did the image “strike the gut”? By asking questions and listening to answers, students learn to identify the unique qualities that distinguish their own work from the work of their classmates, all as different from each other as, for example, the photographs of Walker Evans from those of Lisette Model, or Dorothea Lange’s from Minor White’s.

It is natural that students are sometimes hesitant to criticize the work of a peer or friend; often, for a long time, no one will say anything about an obvious weakness until I push them to do so. Finally, someone will say, “It’s out of focus!” Although students are initially not used to having conversations about images, over time, most learn to become more comfortable and more competent in applying aesthetic criteria. If they want to be photographers, they must learn to speak coherently about photographs.

Looking at Student Photographs
The student work discussed below was completed in three major stages – taking pictures in the field, developing the photograph in the studio, and presenting it in art critique. It is the combination and sustained practice of these stages that contribute to a student photographer’s sensitivity to the subject, technical skill, aesthetic choice, and ethical awareness. The images described here are a domestic interior near Newtown Creek, an iconic and historic ride in Coney Island, and an ordinary street in Queens. Each captures a world threatened by economic or environmental forces. These analyses of the photographs are presented as models of the kind of critique students learn to do in my classes.

“My Mom with Her Daily Lupus Medication,” Jessica Hofmann
Jessica Hofmann completed an assignment I introduced into the Introduction to Photojournalism class syllabus in Fall 2008. When prompted to create a photographic project based on the concept “Thinking Green in Black and White,” she immediately chose Newtown Creek as her
subject. Separating the borough of Queens from Brooklyn, Newtown Creek, was a self-sustaining environment that, before the industrial revolution, brought beauty and bounty to the region. Today Newtown Creek is an industrial wasteland of poisons contaminating the local aquifer and soil. Exploring the Creek, students confront the human practices that have resulted in the demise of a neighborhood and threaten the lives of those individuals who live nearby.

Jessica lived near Newtown Creek her entire life. For her field study, she wanted to reach out to local residents suffering from cancer, respiratory illness, and other physical difficulties, all possible consequences of the Creek’s polluted environment. Yet Jessica realized that for a subject she needed only her mother who suffers from lupus. The point of view of “My Mom with Her Daily Lupus Medication” is level with her mother, seated in a chair at what appears to be the kitchen table. Scattered in the foreground of the image are bottles of prescription medication, and yet there is the suggestion of hope in the diffuse backlighting that spreads over her mother’s hair, and the plants and trinkets dangling in the window. Between the window and Jessica’s mother is the family dog. The 35mm film, sharp and grainy at once, gives the image a cinematic feel. The casual presence of Jessica’s mother and the sympathetic point of view allow one to gaze comfortably into the everyday life of one resident of the Newtown Creek area, but the comfort is disrupted by the threat of sickness. The feeling of domestic intimacy, realized through the plants, dog, light, and above all, the calm presence of Jessica’s mother, is set off against the medication and the implied tragedy of lupus and its association with environmental disaster. It is an image that soothes and disturbs.

“My Mom with Her Daily Lupus Medication” illustrates Jessica’s reflections on her own personal involvement in the Newtown Creek environmental disaster. As she pushed forward on her field project, Jessica saw that she would be rewarded with a portfolio that passionately communicated her feelings. For six weeks, she toured the Creek with scientists, interviewed friends and others allegedly affected by the poisons deposited over many years. During critique sessions, peers made the frequent suggestion that she combine traditional documentary images with portraiture. In response, Jessica mixed together a heavy metal soundtrack, poems from a local artist, and family images that tell a very personal story.
Jessica’s project takes the viewer into a deeper understanding of the personal costs of social ignorance and greed. Her fieldwork had a powerful teaching effect on her peers. Long after she finished the class, I continue to show her work to students, as its impact is key to mindful critical thinking about their lives and the lives of those with whom we share this fragile planet. An example of fearlessness, Jessica confronted personal sadness, transforming the image of her mother’s illness into a social document that indicts the corporate destruction of life.

“Ring of Fire,” Dorje Lama
A Commercial Photography student from Nepal, Dorje decided to photograph the final season of the Coney Island Amusement Park before its transformation into a revitalized and expanded recreation and retail area, and housing complex. He had discovered the park, long considered the summer playground of the working class, when involved in a project about the Coney Island Polar Bear Club. Dorje writes:

The people in Coney Island are my biggest inspiration in this project. The first person in this documentary is David Winter. He has spent a major part of his life in Coney Island and has many memories here. This part of the project will be an intimate approach into the life of David and his attachment to Coney Island. …I will leave it up to the viewer, my professor, and my classmates to judge my work. This is my attempt to reach the “depth of feeling,” that Eugene Smith refers to and I need to work more.

Dorje’s sensitivity to place and person are evident in “Ring of Fire,” a compelling pattern of circles and triangles that subtly leads the eye to the photograph’s key elements of David and the Coney Island Amusement Park. The image’s point of view is distant, allowing the photographer to capture both the “Ring of Fire” and David in a single shot. Edged in a decorative pattern of lights, the Ring forms a wide dark circle that encloses a pale sky and wispy clouds. David is below, alone and centered in the frame, his head bowed; American flags blow briskly in the breeze at the arching top of the ride. The Ring rises above his small figure in the aging amusement park as he walks toward the frame’s left edge. In the empty foreground, David appears unaware
that he is being photographed, his solitude made more apparent by the broken fence between him and the Ring of Fire. The image defies classification; it is an achievement of documentary, fine art, and graphic excellence. The implied patriotism of the flags, the holiday spirit of the festive lights, and the iconic status of the Ring of Fire all suggest a cultural celebration of Coney Island and America. And yet the image is also one of loss. The visual elements of distance, the contrasts of scale, the enclosure of sky, and the black and white format present the viewer with a melancholy awareness of the last vestiges of the Coney Island Amusement Park before its demolition.

“Lost Dreams, 127th Avenue and 172nd Street, Saint Albans, NY 11434,” Homero Campos

In September and October, 2008, Homero Campos interned for me on a month-long expedition to Antarctica funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation Antarctic Writers and Artists Program. It was as an educator and not as a photographer that I made the decision to bring a student on a demanding field assignment to the pristine yet remote Antarctic Archipelagos. Before our departure, I was often asked by faculty and students about the qualities I looked for in an intern. I knew that my companion had to be disciplined, prompt, clearly motivated, and culturally sensitive; he also needed technical skill and physical strength. Most important, my intern had to be curious and receptive to learning about a completely unfamiliar and daunting environment. Born in Ecuador but eager to explore an island where temperatures hovered at about 18 degrees, Homero possessed all of the necessary qualities and more. Surrounded by scientists and support staff from all over the world with whom he lived and worked, Homero learned to pitch a tent, operate a Zodiac boat, cook in sub-freezing temperatures, and maneuver the steep slopes of the Antarctic Peninsula while carrying wooden tripods, film holders, lenses, light meters, and assorted cameras. In the evenings, elephant seals barked and moaned throughout the night and the Antarctic sky filled with constantly changing subtle colors. In the mornings, we hiked along the glacier’s rim, where rocky cliffs and hills rose and fell in a surreal landscape at the edge of the world.

In the late winter of 2009, just after returning from Antarctica, his world-view expanded and with a deepened awareness of social issues, Homero set out upon his first self-defined photography project, “Lost
Dreams,” a series of the facades of sixty foreclosed homes in eastern Queens:

My inspiration came after working with Scott in his “Antarctic Souls project. “ I wanted to take portraits, but ones in which no people were actually portrayed. The idea of “Lost Dreams” came from a profound childhood dream of having a house back in Ecuador. Seeing all these abandoned houses, I felt like someone else had lost their dream, too, and so I wanted to make portraits of them.

At first glance “127th Avenue and 172nd Street, Saint Albans, NY 11434” is as mundane as its caption. Further examination reveals the fine-grained, flawless detail of the photograph, its clear resolution the result of medium format black and white film. Rendered as a high contrast silver gelatin print, the photograph depicts a mid-20th century wood frame home in disrepair, the worn texture of the post WWII siding harks back to a time when this home represented the American Dream. To the right of the house, a plain white door, probably mass produced, stands out as a recent addition, perhaps to keep out vagrants seeking refuge. The weathered patchwork of siding boards and mismatched doors and windows create a story of past owners, and the struggles and successes of those who once lived there.

The stillness of this seemingly ordinary image conceals its power to move the eye and the imagination. The house is centered within the square frame on a late winter day; the trees are leafless and nothing human is in sight. The afternoon light is anti-dramatic, simple yet bleak. The central position of the home draws the eye to its facade, and the stark beauty of the trees pulls the eye upward, and then down to the houses at the right and left edges of the frame. Like a brush stroke, a white sidewalk slashes the bottom of the image, the eye following across until it is abruptly halted by the frame. The mundane creates mystery; stillness activates the eye. Searching the image for clues, the viewer becomes an investigator. The details, geometry, and textures are pleasing as design elements, but the photograph also presents documentary evidence that poses questions: Who, what, where, why, when? The elegant and non-didactic presentation of the subject frees viewers to find their own answers.
Conclusion
Field work and open critique strengthen curricula that recognize the value of integrating “habits of mind, habits of hand, and habits of heart.” The practice of combining field trips with art critique in photography class intensifies the act of seeing and teaches students how the world may be viewed and represented. Looking beyond their own subjective experiences to social realities in Newtown Creek, Coney Island, and Queens, Jessica, Dorje, and Homero documented familiar places in revealing ways. Their feelings influenced their choice of place, but as photographers, they captured objective images of their subjects. It is the delicate balance between self and subject that, as photographers, they must continue to respect.

It is important to stress that the students whose work has been discussed here looked into themselves and each other as creators. They used their eyes and technical skills to understand and express what they saw, and their images help us to see these places more clearly. Talking about pictures together week after week, testing interpretations and judgments, and improving their skills, photography students established the foundations of a critical vocabulary that, with disciplined work, will gradually develop into a firm understanding of the history, theory, and practice of photography.

Notes

2. “While we cannot describe its appearance (the equivalent), we can define its function. When a photograph functions as an Equivalent we can say that at that moment, and for that person the photograph acts as a symbol or plays the role of a metaphor for something that is beyond the subject photographed” (White 17).

Works Consulted


Basic skills mathematics students benefit from a teaching approach that involves contemporary environmental issues. The reasons are twofold: First, student awareness of what is going on in the world prepares them to make wise decisions, in their personal lives and in the public sphere. The hard, clear results that math provides can illuminate the very real effect humans have on the planet. Second, when math examples connect to environmental issues, students who have not been engaged in previous math classes find themselves engaged. Traditional approaches used to teach pre-algebra, algebra, and other fundamental topics have not worked for students taking these courses at a college level. Abstraction and overly contrived questions are likely to leave students at sea. Although there are, of course, many subjects that might engage students in a basic skills math course, an environmental theme provides course content that can give them the power to understand, sustain, and change the world. By making connections between basic skills math and the impact of human behavior on our planet, students can grasp an understanding of both.

In this paper, I provide an explanation for the blocks that basic skills students often bring to class and show several attempts I have made, as an instructor, at integrating environmental material to help students move past their blocks and, simultaneously, have an impact on their world. Central to my approach is the problem-solving method of mathematician György Pólya.

At LaGuardia Community College, basic skills math is taught in the Introduction to Algebra course (MAT095). I have taught the course for three years and, during that time, I have been able, to a limited degree, to test the effectiveness of teaching basic skills math using environmental themes.
Block Breaking
The kind of math that is taught in a basic skills class is, in a sense, more concrete and more connected to the everyday than any other math taught at a university. And yet, the mechanics of solving simple problems and the use of numbers and symbols can obscure for students what is really occurring, making math appear abstract and detached from real life. The trains, scales, and miles of the typical textbook problem that students face are very separate from their lives, are very much “of the problem,” and certainly do little to engage or inspire. Students see mental snares and fear what seem like elusive concepts, when they should see only a formalization of common sense.

Problems presented in class can be more effective transmitters of knowledge if they both demonstrate the operation being taught and show how performing that operation can reveal how our behavior affects the planet. To understand the potential impact, both positive and negative, that an individual can make on the world, a student must be able to quantify and calculate. Important questions, which basic math skills can help to answer, are apparent everywhere: How many gallons of gas does it take to drive to work? How much pollution does a single gallon of gas create on that trip to work? How much pollution must be generated before effects are seen on the atmosphere and on the individuals and animals that inhale that pollution? How many trees does it take to print the morning papers? How many animals lose their habitats when those trees are cut down? These questions are essential to ask and, if students are carefully guided past the hurdles, they will be able to follow delineated methods to answer these questions.

Instructors of basic skills math find that engaging students with the material so that they are actively thinking – and not frozen by the mere presentation of math – is perhaps the most difficult part of teaching the class. My colleagues and I in the department of Mathematics, Engineering, and Computer Science try to find new ways to help students break down barriers. Towards this end, Dr. Frank Wang, Dr. Gordon Crandall, Dr. Prabha Betne, and Dr. Kamal Hajallie, Chair of the department, have worked with Dr. Paul Arcario, Dean of Academic Affairs, and Dr. Bret Eynon, Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs and Director of the LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning. Together, under the direction of Dr. Paul Arcario, they secured a grant from the United States Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of
Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) to support a faculty development seminar called Project Quantum Leap (PQL).

The purpose of the PQL seminar is to develop teaching material for basic skills math courses using the SENCER (Science Education for New Civic Engagements and Responsibilities) approach. SENCER is a National Science Foundation initiative that aims to improve education in engineering and mathematics by “connecting learning to critical civic questions” (“About SENCER”). This vibrant program encourages and assists instructors and professors to explore novel avenues that might uncover effective new ways to teach basic skills. The SENCER approach is perfectly suited to the goal of teaching about the environment with math and teaching math using the environment: “SENCER improves science education by focusing on real world problems and, by so doing, extends the impact of this learning across the curriculum to the broader community and society” (“About SENCER”). I found that the SENCER mission meshed well with my own teaching that draws from the problem-solving methods of mathematician György Pólya.

György Pólya’s Approach to Problem-Solving
The difference between the approach of math students hoping just to use the numbers found in a problem to perform a rote set of calculations to satisfy their teacher and the approach of students who earnestly want to answer a real and important question, is striking. The former are like the individual in John Searle’s “Chinese Room” thought experiment. Given the right instructions, a person in a box could change Chinese symbols coming in one side to English ones to be sent out the other, all without understanding Chinese at all. Although the right translation might come out of the box, the individual inside has no real knowledge. A student who solves an equation without understanding what the equation is or how to construct it, has similarly not truly learned the language of mathematics. That student is far less likely, once the course is over, to be able to solve real-life problems that need math.

In his famous and inspiring book, *How to Solve It*, Hungarian mathematician György Pólya suggested that problems be solved in four steps (xvi–xvii): 1) Understand the problem. You must know what is known, what is not known, and the ultimate goal. 2) Devise a plan. See how what you know connects to what you are trying to
determine. If there are no connections, find other problems that fill in
the gaps. You should understand precisely how you will proceed. 3) 
Carry out the plan. Perform the mechanics of solving and check each
step. Do you have a way of proving that your solution is correct? 4) 
Look back. Be sure to examine your solution to learn from what you
have accomplished.

Most people follow these steps naturally when faced with a typi-
cal daily problem. Drop and shatter a glass of water and you instantly
know that the problem is the glass on the floor. Then, what you need to
find out is exactly where all the shards went. The goal is to remove them
so that no one gets cut. Then you move on to making a plan: Everyone
puts shoes on and someone locates a broom or vacuum cleaner. Execut-
ing the plan involves sweeping or vacuuming the glass. Finally, you look
over the floor to be sure that the glass is gone.

But when it comes to mathematics, many people become befuddled
and do not follow a similar course of action. Anyone who has taught a
basic skills math course has seen that, when it comes to solving math-
ematical problems, the majority of students do not follow Pólya’s pro-
cedure at all. Instead, students jump directly to the third step, “carrying
out a plan,” without first “understanding the problem” or “devising a
plan.” They take whatever numbers they have been handed and attempt
to put them through the mechanics of whatever equation or method has
been taught last. Because they are blindly trying to plug numbers into a
random formula or arithmetic procedure, they fail to solve the problem
and end up feeling completely frustrated, helpless, and discouraged
from trying the problem again. The idea that mathematics is mysteri-
ous, intangible, and essentially beyond the student’s ability to absorb
ends up being reinforced. Occasionally the right numbers are put into
the right formula and the problem is more or less “accidentally” solved.
Even though the student might be pleased to have come up with the
right answer, the occurrence only further ingrains the notion that math
is strangely abstract and that a true understanding is beyond the stu-
dent’s grasp.

If not checked, the student’s growing feeling that math is daunting
and beyond reach is harmful, with long-term, life-affecting conse-
quences. Solving a math problem is, in essence, not unlike solving any
other problem. The numbers and symbols are only the tools – like the
broom or the vacuum cleaner – for the specific task. They allow us to
solve problems that are really just elaborate problems of counting. If students can achieve the understanding that solving a math problem requires following each step of Pólya’s problem-solving method in sequence, they will come to see that math, as a whole, is not impossible to master, and, ultimately, they will be able to use what they have learned long after they have left the classroom.

Lesson Plans
As a participant in the PQL seminar, I used the approaches of SENCER and György Pólya to develop math lesson plans that focus on issues related to the environment. When creating these lesson plans, I hoped that the issues I chose to teach from would be relevant to the students’ lives and simultaneously show them the far-reaching uses of math. At the same time, I wanted the problems that I presented to focus on a group of mathematical topics that most basic skills students have difficulty with. In particular, I have found that students in basic skills courses find fractions, decimals, percents, ratios, and proportions to be the most difficult topics. I selected environmental themes that would address these areas.

Two examples stand out: In the spring of 2008, PQL seminar leaders suggested that we design an environment-themed lesson for MAT095 and test it in our classes. The first lesson I came up with deals with the question of what kind of diaper is better for the environment, cloth or disposable, and was meant to teach the application of fractions, proportions, and ratios. In the first class in which I used the lesson, approximately sixty percent of my students were parents, and I thought that the subject would interest them as well as help teach the required material. The lesson examined two articles with contrasting viewpoints. One was the transcript of an ABC News report aired in May 2005 by Amanda Onion, pointing to research that showed that cloth diapers might be just as detrimental for the environment as disposable diapers (while disposable diapers created mountains of landfill, cloth diapers created oceans of polluted water). The other article, “Cloth vs. Disposable Diapers,” written by Ginny Caldwell for the online Green Living Magazine, maintains that disposable diapers are indeed worse for the environment. She noted that certain cloth diaper systems are more efficient than the traditional cloth diapers used in the calculations that showed that disposables were greener than cloth.
In class, we explored how one might calculate an environmental “footprint.” We used some simple arithmetic to answer some of the following questions: How much do we drive? How much do we fly? How much electricity do we use? Where does our food come from? I was able to introduce the concept of percentages. We also highlighted some “diaper facts” from the article. In particular, many students expressed surprise when they learned that, according to a British study, the results on the environment of two-and-a-half years of diaper waste from a single child “are roughly comparable to driving a car between 1,300 and 2,200 miles” (Onion) and that “[i]n 1990, 18 billion disposables were thrown into United States landfills” and it takes “3.4 billion gallons of oil and over 250,000 trees a year to manufacture” that many diapers (Caldwell).

Once the students had grasped the material, we worked on the following three problems, constructed to refer directly to issues discussed in the readings.

1. It takes 3.4 billion gallons of oil and over 250,000 trees a year to produce 18 billion disposable diapers. How many diapers can a single tree produce?
2. On average, children in the U.S. wear diapers until they are 30 months old. If this average is reduced to 20 months, how many fewer diapers will a single child use? Assume each child wears an average of 8 diapers a day.
3. Assume that of the 2 million children in the U.S., the average length of time each wears diapers is reduced from 30 months to 20 months. How many trees will be saved?

The three questions above highlighted the facts that had intrigued the students when they read the assigned reading material. Although the questions mirrored the more traditional questions found in the textbook regarding fractions, proportions, and ratios, they dealt with a topic with which the students were now thoroughly engaged.

The students appeared focused on the work before them and were truly enjoying trying to answer the questions. In discussion, it was clear that they understood the goals and outcomes of the problems. Although they still had their difficulties, I was glad to see that they were much less likely to try to solve the problem with rote mechanics before first
understanding the nature of the problem. Where I had often seen students attempt to extract the numbers from a problem and just perform what they thought was the required operation, now the students were trying to figure out the answer to a question posed in plain English that they could solve with the materials at hand. Several told me that the articles helped them realize something about a subject they had not paid attention to before. I also received comments from several parents in the class about how they would try to help reduce waste by potty training their children earlier.

In another lesson, I wanted to introduce a simple concrete example that would show the students how basic skills are needed to make purchasing decisions – and how those decisions might affect our planet. The lecture was about the application of percents – another topic that many students have difficulty with. I designed a lesson that compared the fuel efficiency of two cars. At the beginning of the class, I asked the students which car they would choose if someone offered them the choice between an apoly Honda Civic and a Mercedes. As I expected, most of the students answered that they would take the Mercedes. Then I asked which car would save them money on gas and which would pollute the air less. I introduced the following problem: Assume you drove 15,000 miles during 2008. 45% was city driving and 55% highway driving. Assume the price of gas was $3.75 per gallon. Now assume that you drove the Honda Civic which gets 40 miles per gallon in the city and 43 miles per gallon on the highway.

In order to guide students towards figuring out the annual cost of gas for the Civic, I broke down the problem into more fundamental questions:

1. How many gallons of gasoline did you use for highway driving during 2008?
2. How many gallons of gasoline did you use for city driving during 2008?
3. How many total gallons of gasoline did you use during 2008?
4. How much did you spend on gasoline during 2008?

Then, I asked students to answer questions 1 through 4 assuming that they drove a Mercedes-Benz E63 AMG instead of a Honda Civic Hybrid. I told them to assume that the Mercedes-Benz gets 13 miles per
gallon in the city and 20 miles per gallon on the highway. Finally, I posed this question: Remembering that, on average, gasoline cost $3.75 per gallon during 2008, how much money would you save if you drove a Honda Civic Hybrid instead of a Mercedes-Benz E63 AMG?

Together we discovered that, with the assumptions made above, driving a Mercedes would have cost $2,000 more in gas in 2008 than driving the Honda Civic. Some students were surprised by the extent to which making a few calculations could affect both their pocket and the environment. By and large, the class seemed delighted to be toying with choosing a car and exploring which of the two was truly best for them.

I thought that if I offered the kind of problem that students might be more naturally interested in solving, they would better follow the four steps of problem solving as described by Pólya. Instead of using “artificial” problems designed solely for use in math courses, I hoped that the “diaper debate” lesson and the lesson comparing the efficiency of two cars would make the problem-solving sequence more natural and, eventually, intuitive to students. My fundamental belief is that when students understand the solving power of mathematics and see that math problems are not so different from other life problems, including problems that have an impact on the environment, then they can get beyond the blocks that hold them back. The diaper debate and car comparison examples would, I hoped, show them examples of questions they would want to answer – What diapers should I use? What kind of car should I drive? – and ultimately allow them to see math as merely the tool that it is for solving problems related to those questions.

Of course, if the blocks came tumbling down so easily, they probably would not be there in the first place. It was a little surprising for me to see that even some of the stronger students had difficulty transforming the problem about the Honda Civic versus the Mercedes into mathematical terms, even though they seemed to grasp the nature of the problem. In particular, the percentages in the car efficiency lesson were tripping them up. I tried using more examples, from other areas, and asked them the following: In a class of 30 students, if 40 percent are female, how many female students are there in the class? They were still a bit of confused; so I simplified further. What if 50 percent of them were female? This question they answered correctly right away. Then I explained the similarity of the two questions, and why the concept of 40 percent is not any different or more difficult to understand than 50
percent. I further illustrated how to think of 40 percent as a fraction by drawing a pizza on the board and showing them that if we cut the pizza into 100 slices, 40 slices would represent 40 percent.

Once the students had grasped this concept and we returned to our comparison of the two cars, the problems were much easier for them. This class session proved to be an important moment for the students. With the realization that two seemingly different problems were similar, and that the same math technique was used in both, they were now on the path to using percentages themselves in unforeseen situations. Math was becoming, I would like to think, a tool for their use. Most of the students enjoyed, in particular, working out the answer for the Mercedes. I was pleased to see that when they discovered that driving the Mercedes would have cost them more than $2,000 for gas, many started to change their choice. The calculations sparked a discussion about the results. One student commented, “Who wants to use a Mercedes?” Another student remarked, “I guess you wouldn’t care if you’re rich.” Then I asked the students to put the environmental impact of the two cars into consideration. How would the difference in gas usage affect the atmosphere? How would their choice of car affect their “footprint?” If everyone who had a Honda Civic switched to a Mercedes, would there be a discernable effect on the environment?

I felt that the lesson was well received. Certainly the students were more engaged than in previous classes and understood exactly what it was we were trying to solve. No one jumped straight to the third step of Pólya’s problem-solving procedure. A possible explanation: Because the students saw how using math could directly affect their pocketbooks, they paid attention to and came to understand the importance of each problem-solving step. And the surprising conclusion we reached – that the Civic might be the “better” car – seemed to give students the kind of satisfaction one gets from using the right tool to get a job done. I was encouraged to see that the students were truly engaged in solving a real-world problem.

Conclusion and a Remaining Question
Instructors must pay as much attention to breaking down the walls that prevent learning as they do to teaching the actual course material. And, I believe, instructors should attempt to use more relevant topics to help elicit student interest. My experience showed me that using sub-
ject matter that focuses on how humans affect the environment helps students realize and appreciate why mathematics is important to help them make daily decisions. Teaching with concrete, real-life examples does help both to spark student interest in the environment and to help them understand the concepts in a basic skills math course.

However, success in mathematics, like success in most subjects, and even, one might say, in most walks of life, is not driven by inspiration alone. While I was certainly pleased to see students actively involved in solving the themed problems, and while I believe that they truly understood how and why math is important in solving day-to-day problems, I am not one-hundred-percent sure that the exercise actually facilitated greater learning. Moving towards fluency in mathematics – a goal of basic skills mathematics classes – is like moving towards fluency in any language: Although there may be some ways of learning that are better than others, there is no shortcut for immersion and practice. With environmental themes, students may be taught to see the usefulness of math in problems that affect them personally as well as problems of great magnitude, but, in order to be able to use those skills on their own, outside of class, they must learn to move from the concrete to the abstract and back again. My own experience did not provide a large enough sample group to answer the question of whether or not an engaging environmental theme truly enhanced the building of basic skills in mathematics. A larger study, involving multiple classes and instructors, would be needed to examine the efficacy of various strategies for teaching basic skills math and, ultimately, to provide a definitive answer for instructors dedicated to teaching their students as effectively as possible.

On the flip side, it is safe to say that, from an environmental perspective, the themed math lessons were a success. Teaching with informative, engaging, environmental subject matter certainly raised student awareness about their potential effect on the world. If examples in math courses were more often drawn from environmental subject matter, it is hard to see that the practice would have anything but a positive impact on the world.
Works Consulted


“Slowly Carving A Niche”

Notes on Reading a Poem for a Month

T.K. Dalton, English

Since poetry is literature in its essential and purest form – the mode of writing in which we find at the same time the most varied uses of language and the highest degree of order – the first aim of the teacher of literature will be to make his students better readers of poetry. He will try by every means in his power to bring out the complete and agile response to words that is demanded by a good poem.

Reuben Brower1

Introduction
A good poem uses language provocatively to express a novel worldview with unmatched brevity. These qualities led literary critic Reuben Brower to design and teach a literature course focused on what he called “reading in slow motion” (4). He noticed that new media, notably television, had changed the way the students were approaching their assigned texts (5). A half-century later, many argue that new media – the Internet and its associated social technologies – affect young students’ reading habits as dramatically. Psychologists have argued that the Web promotes the development of a habit of short-attention cognitive activity (Levine, Waite, and Bowman 565). In The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains, Nicholas Carr notes that new media behave more like television than like print, conquering our sustained attention by dividing it (131–32). That division has serious impacts on a composition instructor’s ability to teach critical thinking and argumentation through reading and writing. Good writers are good readers. Good reading – defined as an interaction between a person and a text where one or more new ideas are acquired, connected to other ideas, or refuted for a rational reason – is a project that relies on patient observation and sustained attention to detail in order to be successful. Good readers usually view reading as
more habit than chore. Unlike a chore, a habit—though thinking of reading as a practice could be equally useful—can be sustained beyond the context in which it is learned or needed. A habit lives beyond the life of the project.

The activity described in this essay turns reading into such a project. In my Fall 2009 Composition I (ENG101) course at LaGuardia Community College, students read the same poem—Dorianne Laux’s “Cello” (see p. 122)—every day for a month, and each day they keep a written journal of the process. In this essay, I will discuss one student’s journal in depth. The entries in this journal demonstrate the assignment’s three related purposes: to observe literature “in its essential and purest form” (Brower 4); to produce “the complete and agile response to words demanded by a good poem” or text (Brower 5); and to understand and adapt to digital media’s impact on literary culture. This last promotes speed and intertextual linkage at the expense of concentration and intratextual linkage. I believe that the habit of good reading is unsustainable unless our students understand its patterns and parts. The ability to observe closely with patience and attention to detail is a habit that must be practiced in concert with course objectives in order to strengthen new, sustainable reading habits in our students.

The Problem with Writing

Every page was once a blank page, just as every word that appears on it now was not always there, but instead reflects the final result of countless large and small deliberations. All the elements of good writing depend on the writer’s skill in choosing one word instead of another. And what grabs and keeps our interest has everything to do with these choices. (Prose 16)

Writing is simple. The maddening part of its simplicity lies in the complete control the writer has over her message. While I had always tried to get students “under the hood” of their sentences and paragraphs, in my second semester teaching it became clear that the problem with their sentences stemmed, in part, from a lack of good models. For a solution, I looked toward reading, what Scholes calls writing’s “natural reciprocal” (“Transition” 166; qtd. in Chickering 263). The symbiotic relationship between writing and reading is most obvious in assign-
ments involving the close imitation of the prose of a master writer, a kind of apprenticeship. Love and theft aren’t so far apart, as Jonathan Lethem asserts in “The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism,” an essay we read in this class. One purpose of this project was to present literature as a place to find ideas to reject or adopt, synthesize or co-opt. Reading is where this search for original arguments must begin. Reading poetry is appealing for two reasons similar to those Brower cited: its concision and its depth.

The slow reading journals were one way to engage students daily in a word-level way with text. However they represented the least formal version of this project. Reading, and discussions of reading, were a systematic part of every class meeting. Over two years of teaching, I noticed that textual analysis was both smoother and deeper when performed in class. Asked to explicate independently, students were often at a loss. Noticing a similar pattern of difficulty, more experienced teachers suggested a theory. “Unintentionally, we [teachers] hide the effort involved, making textual analysis seem simple and straightforward,” Sherry Linkon observed in a recent essay. “We then ask students to develop their own readings of texts and present them in papers. And all too often, we are disappointed with the results” (248). Reading Linkon, I began to wonder if part of this disappointment stemmed from the impact the Internet had on reading habits. Even in my own reading, the Internet fosters a sense of dependence wherein the ability to constantly refer back to something eliminates the necessity to remember it. Long-term, repeated, low-risk, frequently-checked, “unwired” assignments, like the slow reading journals, can help exorcize this tendency.
Analysis of a Student Response to “Cello”

_Cello_
When a dead tree falls in a forest
it often falls into the arms
of a living tree. The dead,
thus embraced, rasp in wind,
slowly carving a niche
in the living branch, sheering away
the rough outer flesh, revealing
the pinkish, yellowish, feverish
inner bark. For years
the dead tree rubs its fallen body
against the living, building
its dead music, making its raw mark,
wearing the tough bough down,
moaning in wind, the deep
rosined bow sound of the living
shouldering the dead.

Dorianne Laux

I hope I don’t sound dumb or anything but it sounds like the
word ‘cielo’ which in spanish (sic) means sky so maybe that is
the meaning of it. Well I went online and looked up the meaning
of ‘cello’ and it meant like a big violin. So maybe that is what
the poem is about.

Chloe, composition student

The above early journal reflection on Laux’s poem is typical of the
responses of the entire class. Its author, Chloe, (not her real name) is one
of two students whose journals I will examine in some detail here. First,
let us start with the writer’s topic sentence – something they had learned
about quite a bit that term. The sentence is essentially a throat clear-
ing, a quasi-apology (“I hope I don’t sound dumb or anything but...”).
This uncertainty repeats itself in linguistic hiccups – two instances of
“maybe,” along with other conjunctions of self-deprecation like “so,”
“well,” and “like.” The uncertainty diminished and was largely absent in later entries, replaced with equally informal but strikingly confident and diligent diction. That confidence, to me, came in part from the daily practice of writing a paragraph. Second, the writer makes an immediate – and erroneous – connection between the title of the poem, “Cello,” and a misleadingly similar word from the reader’s native language: “it sounds like the word ‘cielo’ which in spanish (sic) means sky.” This connection (between sky and cello) ends up being apt and lovely, given the resonances of the poem with grief generally and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in particular. In her last entry, Chloe moved beyond even that traumatic event to the deeper, more general theme of grief, memory, and the omnipresence – and interdependence – of the dead to the living. Third, faced with an unfamiliar term – the title of the poem and a musical instrument – the writer’s first impulse may not surprise anyone: “Well I went online. . .”. What is interesting here is that the writer records that “the meaning of cello” is “like a big violin.” The phrase is superficial, but not incorrect. To the writer, this quickly found definition sufficiently solves the problem of the assignment, perhaps even of “Cello,” and satisfies the demands of the slow reading journal: “So maybe that is what the poem is about.” If the writer were able to stay in the same “room” with the poem a bit longer, she might follow her curiosity long enough to finally find words.

Sometimes finding the words is how critical thinking starts. As a student in a high school English class, Francine Prose was once assigned to circle all references to eye-related words in King Lear and Oedipus Rex (4). What felt like learning at the time, she realized, was actually a kind of review: “We all begin as close readers,” she recalls. “Word by word is how we learn to hear and then read, which seems only fitting, because it is how the books we are reading are written in the first place” (5). Francine Prose calls literature – slow reading journals included – an “endless source of courage and confirmation” (250). Perhaps the most challenging aspect of the “slow reading” project is to present reading a poem as an encounter with ambiguity. That is, the poem and the journal entries are a kind of riddle to solve, a stunt the teacher has asked the students to perform; they are also a gorgeous work of art about a serious subject; and, finally, they are a kind of relationship. As student readers become increasingly familiar with a text, that familiarity breeds confidence. Analyzing poetry is
neither “natural” nor “instinctual,” to borrow Linkon’s terms (248), but building a relationship is. That relationship, like any social bond, grows stronger as the unknown becomes known. Students had to look up words such as “rasp” and “moan;” few knew what a cello was, and most definitions stopped at “a big violin.”

Many students resisted this sustained reading preferring not to think of a poem as a relationship and a riddle, they saw it simply as the latter which was more time-effective. Complaining and distraction entered the journals of many students: “I don’t get it,” wrote many. “I’m very confused.” Chloe, too, was frustrated by a seemingly missing connection: “If a cello is a giant violin,” she wrote, “then what does a tree have to do with it?” Asked to focus on language and, later, image, their discomfort happened quite generally. Early in Chloe’s journal, she writes, “The poem is powerful because it expresses a strong emotion in such details. I am not able to escape.”

A week into the assignment, I spent a small amount of class time prompting them to write at home on certain parts of the poem. This scaffolding both lowered frustration and led to many self-generated questions. Every student built confidence in a few different ways. “If a ‘tree’ is dead, how does it carve a niche?” wrote Chloe in her fifth entry. This is not literary analysis; it is curiosity, relevant to a poem that serves as an analogy for 9/11. “What happened to that tree?” wondered another student, Daisuke, in his eighth entry. “Did it die from the forest fire? Did it die because it was sick?”

The focus on image improved the students’ entries as it forced them to articulate the poem’s basic facts: “This is what i’ve (sic) come to realize. The cello must make some type of sad sound. In the poem, it says ‘the deep rosined bow sound of the living shouldering the dead,’ as well as ‘the dead tree rubs its fallen body against the living, building its dead music.’ That must be what has to do with the cello.” Ten days later, Chloe wrote, “I like the way she uses a lot of concrete details so I have all those images. The more I read the poem, the sadder I feel (11/06).” Here are tentative, informal ties between aspects of a poem (concrete detail and image) and an emotional reaction (“strong” and “sadder”). It is not a great leap forward, hardly the stuff of a main idea. But these notes are the seeds of curiosity, which are where main ideas originate.
One reason I picked Laux’s poem is its focus on a “controlling”
image. In one class, I asked students to sit with that main image and
picture it for a few minutes before they began their writing at home
that night. Having decoded the other language in the poem, their
focused writing produced claims like this one from Daisuke: “Sadness
is unavoidable when you lose someone you love. It is necessary to
express the sorrow and bemoan the loss.” On Day 22, his daily writing
had produced what Emerson might have called a “creative reading,”
in which “the mind is braced by labor and invention.” Scholes calls
this the work of “virtuoso readers, who produce readings that are
breathtakingly original” (“Reading”). Prose echoes this emphasis on
originality, and suggests that reading’s solitary nature is what allows its
original interpretations: “Reading can give you the courage to resist all
the pressures that our culture exerts on you to write in a certain way,
or to follow a prescribed form,” she writes (258). Deviating from “pre-
scribed form” is among that hardest tasks my student writers face and
other instructors have shared that concern with me. A faculty member
once, told me that the greatest problem she saw in her students’ writing
was a lack of voice. This project actively asks students to rebel, and
many of them are not accustomed to assignments where rebellion is
met with reward. At its core, though, the appeal of reading is its ability
to connect the reader to other lonely voices. That harmony makes one’s
own voice feel stronger, louder, or at least more in tune.

Scholes cautions that creative reading does not suit all the short-
term purposes of semester-by-semester education: “[T]he more original
these readers become, the less they remain readers. Their readings
become new works, writings, if you will, for which the originals were
only pretexts, and those who create them become authors” (“Read-
ing”). Scholes rejects the notion that such originality can be taught
directly. Rather, it must be demonstrated through a mindful approach
to reading skills that never forgets the two people, reader and writer,
engaged not in competition but in dialogue – a prescient dialogue that
exists in the present for the future benefit of the reader, and even for
the next reader, and the next.
Conclusion

For days I have been trying to find the words to describe how I feel about this poem. I think I finally found it: “startlingly intimate.”

Daisuke, composition student

The above passage comes from a late journal entry by Daisuke. This entry, and others like it, show the month-long project brought to fruition. He has fought back interruption, and he has found the words. Many things in our students’ lives conspire to keep them away from empty moments with a blank page. I asked them to record time, place, and mood, and in many entries, the writers began with environmental detail. The journals were also peppered with candid interruptions. A partial list: questions about grammar and spelling, screaming children, nagging parents, texts from friends, bills from utility companies, a call from a manager asking, “Can you cover a shift?”, a migraine, no sleep, crankiness and despair and loneliness and sadness and lust, never mind doubt and anxiety about the assignment’s outcome – which, to this particular group of students, mattered much more than process no matter what their teacher argued otherwise. Once silenced, this cacophony leaves a blank page, a demanding language, and questions with no clear answers. I love writing, but there are days when I happily choose interruption over its alternative.

An empty moment spent concentrating on a blank page can make an experienced writer whimper. Novice writers panic and return to old habits; moments of rhetorical flair can be traced back to sixth-grade English class. Panic is a kind of stage fright, and its solution is rehearsal. The slow reading journals, daily paragraphs on a single poem offers students a chance to practice the following advice from writer Ron Carlson:

The most important thing a writer can do after completing a sentence is to stay in the room. The great temptation is to leave the room to celebrate the completion of the sentence or to go out in the den where the television lies like a dormant monster and rest up for a few days for the next sentence or to go wander the seductive possibilities of the kitchen. But. It’s this simple.
The writer is the person who stays in the room. . . . The writer understands that to stand up from the desk is to fail, and to leave the room is so radical and thorough a failure as to not be reversible. (24; emphasis in the original)

Carlson’s phrase is both literal and figurative advice for writers: when it gets hard, don’t get up for coffee and don’t flinch emotionally. In the room, focused entirely on the writing, students do not succumb to distraction or interruption but give the ideas at hand their full attention. As our students know, this discipline is not easy. Staying in the room requires practice; students must be convinced to focus on their textual choices. Prose’s emphasis on text as “the final result of countless large and small deliberations,” as demonstrations of “the writer’s skill in choosing one word instead of the other” (16), is deeply intimidating and hugely empowering. It leads to panic at first, but once the squirming ends, the panic subsides.

The practice of reading in a concentrated, attentive way that engages a single poem for a sustained period offers interruption some friction. Reading this slowly is difficult to sustain for longer than a month; for some students, even a month feels too long. What matters is the forming of a habit that balances the habits of other media. New media are astounding in their ability to forge real – and real-time – connections to others like and unlike myself. However, the connections I know to be deepest in my life are those I have experienced as a writer, when I recognized a fleeting feeling or a beautiful incident long enough to capture it precisely in language. These instances, what Virginia Woolf called “moments of being,” make me not just a writer, but a fully alive human being. These are moments to which everyone deserves unobstructed access.

Note
Works Consulted


Training to Notice, Learning to Care

The Development of Place Attachment and Activism in an Introductory Psychology Class

Miriam Shelton, Social Science

Background
In 2009, when the American Psychological Association Task Force on Climate Control issued a report urging psychologists to address climate change in their classrooms (Swim et.al. 20-24), I took up the challenge. For my 2009–2010 General Psychology (SSY101) classes at LaGuardia Community College, I would create some learning activities designed to prepare students psychologically to engage in environmentally responsible behavior (ERB). Ultimately, I implemented a two-pronged developmental approach based on the following thesis: If students are to engage willingly in resource-sustainable practices, they must first become individuals who notice and care about their environment, and they must also develop a sense of confidence regarding the effectiveness of their actions.

Research on environmental education programs suggests that the most effective approaches target three areas: attitudes, empowerment, and knowledge (Hungerford and Volk; Stern; Jurin and Fortner; Chawla and Cushing). Among the attitudes that may motivate ERB is place attachment (Vaske and Kobrin; Stedman). Place attachment refers to the emotional bond between a person and a particular place. The term implies that the place has acquired a sense of personal meaning over time:

These personal meanings may be influenced – at least partially – by structured experiences (e.g. organized youth work programs) that involve commitment and time. . . .If these attachments . . . have consequences in other aspects of a person’s life, individuals may be more likely to behave in an environmentally responsible manner. (Vaske and Kobrin 17)
Further, place attachment is usually understood to involve the two processes of place dependence and place identity (Williams et al. 31). Whereas place dependence reflects a functional attachment based on the experiences a place offers, i.e., on what can be done there (Stokols and Shumaker 157–58), place identity refers to “those dimensions of the self that define the individual’s personal identity in relation to the physical environment” (Proshansky 155).

Using the city of New Orleans as an example, place dependence would refer to the many physical and cultural-historical qualities that exist in no other American city, such as its architecture, music, Carnival, and cuisine, to name just a few. These characteristics afford experiences that are available only, or most dramatically, in that city. Place identity, on the other hand, refers to the more visceral emotional attachment that compels former residents to return and rebuild in St. Bernard Parish, despite the threat of future storms, floods, or social violence. Such individuals might explain their community rootedness as simply “coming home,” or “This is who I am; my family has lived here for five generations.” The place has become an integral part of their personal and family identities.

Place attachment (attitude) is built through time and experience, including social interactions and active reflective processes (Brooks, Wallace, and Williams 336). Successful environmental educational programs have facilitated the empowerment required to promote student ERB by instituting activities that allow students to choose personally significant goals, work collectively on environmental actions, and experience success in doing so (Youniss and Yates; Vaske and Kobrin; Chawla and Cushing). By “integrating action for the common good into their sense of identity” (Chawla and Cushing 448), students develop a “civic identity” (Youniss and Yates) and experience a sense of “self-efficacy” regarding environmentally significant activity (Bandura 122):

Efficacy in dealing with one’s environment is not a fixed act or simply a matter of knowing what to do. Rather, it involves a generative capability in which component cognitive, social, and behavioral skills must be organized into integrated courses of action to serve innumerable purposes. . . . Operative competence requires orchestration and continuous improvisation.
of multiple subskills to manage ever-changing circumstances. 

Perceived self-efficacy is concerned with judgments of how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations. (Bandura 122)

The availability of role models, encouragement from others, and perseverance despite frustration and fatigue all contribute to self-efficacy and therefore to empowerment. But Bandura insists that gaining specific skills (knowledge) and experiencing success in their application are the most powerful methods by which we acquire self-efficacy (126–28). To illustrate: becoming a good basketball player requires the mastery of both offensive and defensive play and individual as well as team play. Within such skills as shooting accurately, passing, and guarding the opponent are subskills such as how to move one’s feet correctly, and how far to position oneself in relation to other players. The ability to win a game requires careful, step-by-step training in each of these skills in order to bring each into play according to a strategic plan. Thus, believing in oneself as a winner is not a matter of wishful thinking or exceptional talent, but of concerted, well-honed skills.

Of the three theoretical dimensions of environmental activity and education (attitudes, empowerment, and knowledge), I identified ways to contribute to two of these, attitudes and empowerment, within the range of learning activities of my General Psychology class. I found no reasonable way to integrate concrete knowledge about environmental sustainability into my already crowded course syllabus. But I could promote self-efficacy in my students by assigning a project that would develop the same skills they might use to engage in ERB. For students at LaGuardia Community College, building place attachment would involve classroom and extracurricular experiences and student services (functional place dependence) and identity-fostering self-reflection (place identity).

I hoped that the class project would spur student motivation for making changes at the private level, such as using the stairs instead of the elevator. Even more important, I hoped it would foster the leadership to make changes in the public arena. Chawla and Cushing argue that environmental education “needs to emphasize the most strategic actions. . . . An analysis of the world’s most serious environmental problems . . . suggests that the effect of private actions is limited unless it is
combined with organizing for collective public change” (438). While place attachment is instrumental in promoting both types of change, building skills specifically related to public activity would broaden both the range of activity and the level of accomplishment students could gain from ERB.

**Application in Psychology Class**

Having decided that the study of attachment to place and the development of self-efficacy in advocating for environmental changes could be integrated into my General Psychology course, I planned my methods. Students’ evolving attachment to LaGuardia Community College could be made more conscious through experiences that would increase their awareness of places in general, and of the college campus in particular. Increased self-efficacy for civic engagement could be facilitated by assigning a project in which students conducted research on campus issues that concerned them and gained practice in advocating for these issues with the college administration.

The sequence of class activities unfolded as follows: During the first week of class, students wrote a personal essay in which they identified a place meaningful to them and described the physical, social, and personal aspects of its importance. This assignment was framed as an illustration of the importance of the socio-cultural contexts that lie behind psychological processes such as perception, memory, and personality, among others, a topic routinely addressed in an introduction to psychology class. However, I also wanted the students to begin reflecting on the meaning of place.

The resulting essays were sensitive and personal. Students wrote of places that offered opportunities for self-expression, personal reflection, privacy, and social relations with significant people and groups. The essays stressed the importance of having a place of belonging and refuge. Contrary to some theories about place (Stedman, 2003), many of the places students described were aesthetically impoverished. To illustrate, one student told of her fond memories of the bleak and sparsely furnished living room in a home that had been filled with more punishment than joy. Her attachment to the living room drew from the fact that it was the place where she met her father on his visits after her parents’ separation. On their own, students discovered that what happens in a place is more important than its physical structure or
appearance. As might be expected, the essays stimulated class dis-
cussion about perception and identity and set the tone for personal and
intimate interactions that persisted throughout the semester.

I further stimulated sensitivity to college as “place” with small
extra-credit assignments and class discussions about aspects of the
LaGuardia campus usually left out of conscious reflection. For instance,
during a unit on perception, we discussed the concept of “attentional
blindness,” those moments in which we fail to notice things that are, in
fact, easily visible. For a week, students were required to keep track of
their encounters with members of the campus custodial staff, recording
the times and places of such encounters. Some students had become so
used to “not seeing” the staff that they found the task nearly impos-
sible. Others reported, with surprise, that they were continually taking
out their notepads to register a “sighting.” In sum, custodial staff were
more present and active than students had expected.

Similarly, in the unit on memory, the intrinsic processing of space
was illustrated by an assignment asking students to draw from memory,
and with as much precision as possible, the Atrium space in the E Build-
ing. Later, students explored methods by which their memory could be
improved. Test results showed that students strengthened their recall of
the Atrium layout only when they were given specific details to process,
such as the number and placement of columns or trash cans. Otherwise,
students’ memories of the Atrium, as rendered in their before and after
drawings, were nearly identical. While such exercises would not, by
themselves, create an emotional attachment to the campus, increased
awareness of their own perceptual processes might lead students to
become more alert to and reflective about the conscious and uncon-
scious ways they were assimilating experiences on campus.

Following Bandura, I designed the major class research project
in stages that isolated concrete skills; in this way, students could gain
mastery of each project component without being overwhelmed by its
complexity. First, students met in small groups to suggest ways that
LaGuardia Community College could become a better place in which
to learn. Next, each student selected one suggestion on which to focus
and developed a research plan that included two research components:
a) data gathered from observing campus activities, and b) data gathered
from surveying the attitudes and behaviors of 20 fellow students. After
revising the plans with my feedback, students went to work in small
groups, or, if they preferred, alone.

The final research reports included four sections. First, students
explained their selection of a research topic (“Why I chose to do this
research”); second, they described their methods for gathering data;
and third, they described their research findings. In the fourth and final
section of the report, students analyzed their data and related their
topic to the field of psychology. In addition, they wrote letters to the
college administration, advocating for change based on their findings.
Some students also offered specific suggestions for improvement. As the
project’s final step, a member of the college administrative staff, who
had received and reviewed some of the letters, came to class to discuss
some of the issues raised by the students.

I should clarify that the assignment did not require that the project
refer to issues of environmental sustainability or resource preservation. Ultimately, I hoped that the project might change the way students
perceived their relationship to LaGuardia Community College, seeing
themselves less as passive consumers of the school’s educational offer-
ings and more as shapers of their educational environment. If they
could make this shift with regard to a topic of interest to them, they
might then be able to transfer those skills and feelings of self-efficacy
to addressing problems of environmental sustainability.

The Research
Most students chose research topics that concerned functional aspects
of college life and services. For instance, some students studied schedul-
ing problems in student service offices, such as Tutoring, Financial Aid,
and the Writing Center. Others looked at the difficulties caused by the
high cost of textbooks, with some exploring ways to reduce the cost
of the books, and others examining the effects of photocopying a large
volume of class materials. Some of the most poignant data came from
studies relating to management of personal finances and financial aid.
Monetary concerns were also reflected in studies of cafeteria food and
the cost of discovering, even one day late, that advisors had recom-
manded an unnecessary class.

About half of the projects dealt directly with issues of place and
space. For instance, one student investigated ways to maximize the
small space of the workout room, while two groups tackled the diffi-
culty of getting to class on time when rushing between buildings. However, none of the students investigated topics that dealt directly with “greening” the campus. In fact, in the few cases where a conservation approach might have been taken, students took the opposite path, recommending, for example, that the college build more elevators, rather than encouraging increased use of the stairs. Two students, however, did consider conservation in their reflective analyses. One referred to the overdependence on elevators, and another to the potential side effects of changing how students move between buildings.

As indicated earlier, the project included writing a letter to campus administrators. Some students addressed their letters to directors of specific college programs. Those who were not sure whom to address wrote to the college president. Nearly a third of the class shared these letters as well as other sections of their research with a senior administrator in the President’s Office, who then visited the class, listened to student concerns, and explained some factors that contribute to administrative decision-making. He discussed the dilemmas presented by some of the issues, and reported on changes to staffing and buildings currently being implemented. Finally, he offered to pass student ideas on to other administrators who might be in a position to act on them.

The value of this aspect of the project is confirmed by Chawla and Cushing, who suggest that it is important for youth to have “opportunities for discussion, analyzing public issues together, determining shared goals, resolving conflicts and articulating strategies for overcoming challenges and achieving success” (448). Much more reserved with the college administrator than in usual class discussion, students later reported to me how much they valued the conversation and the opportunity to be heard. They greatly appreciated learning about changes that, under normal circumstances, they would hear about only after implementation. As one student put it, “It felt great to see the speaker come in and comment on my research. It lets you know that your voice is heard more.” Not only did this experience help develop student feelings of self-efficacy, but it was also a reason to think of LaGuardia Community College in a new way – as a place where administrators listen and take seriously the knowledge and point of view of students.

At the end of the semester, I offered five bonus points to students who completed a questionnaire through which I attempted to assess the value of the project as an educational tool. First, I wanted to get a
sense of whether my goal of sensitizing the students to their relationship to the college had been achieved. The class activities would not have produced an attachment to the college independently from the students’ other experiences at LaGuardia Community College. Therefore, the first question addressed general changes in attitudes toward the college. The second question referred specifically to the class project and to the dimension of place identity in particular. The third question sought to identify difficulties students had encountered in completing the research. Finally, in order to get a measure of self-efficacy, I asked students to indicate the likelihood of their contacting administrative staff about a perceived problem in the future.

All of the students completed the survey and 95% of the class gave permission for their responses to be used and quoted in faculty research about the class projects. Those questionnaires not permitted to be used for research did not appear, as a group, to be remarkably different from those released for use. The following analysis is based on 28 completed surveys.

Analysis of the Survey
Answers to the first question – “How has your view of LaGuardia Community College evolved or changed during your time as a student?” – were used to measure overall changes in place attachment. It was not possible to isolate the effect of my introductory psychology class from other experiences at the college. Responses suggest that place attachment was indeed developing in the students. As one student expressed it, “At first I didn’t think I would enjoy LaGuardia, but it has turned out to be a great experience. The college has everything I feel I need to do well. I’m very happy about all the support students are offered.” On the other hand, four students (14%) reported no change in their attitudes toward the college, and three students (11%) stated that upsetting experiences, reported as “when you need something, you get the runaround,” had led them to develop ambivalent or negative views of the school.

Positive changes in opinions of the college were reported by 82% of the students. Whereas student essays about favorite places referred to functional qualities such as privacy, “getting away,” self-expression and leadership development, functional attachment to the College is more narrowly conceived. Eleven (42%) of the students cited components of
the college that directly relate to achieving their academic goals, most prominent among them the faculty:

- At first I thought of this college as my last option or pick, but I found that, given the professors and their attitudes, it is a great college.
- Professors are more willing to help and spend more time explaining hard topics.
- As a freshman at LaGuardia, I am having a great time. As a full-time parent [and] worker, LaGuardia really fit my schedule. So far, I met some great and compassionate teachers.

In their comments on the survey questionnaire, students reported that academic experiences often led to personal changes, as place dependency, an indication of what activity the place facilitates, gave way to place identity, a change in one’s self-perception based on experiences that have occurred in the place. In the essays about favorite places, place identity referred mostly to rootedness in a house, town, or country. But in the survey, nine students (39%) responded with descriptions of changes in themselves that are directly related to being at LaGuardia Community College:

- LAGCC changed my view on school, it made me take my schoolwork seriously and made me prioritize my time wisely.
- My time at LaGuardia has changed my life in a positive way. I have become more responsible and developed more goals for myself.
- My time here has shown me that if I apply myself, I can be a great student.

Three students (13%) appreciated the opportunity to make friends and to integrate the academic and social aspects of their lives. As place attachment grows over time, the two dimensions of place dependency and place identity may shift and broaden along with the students’ changing identities and competencies.

The survey’s second question – “In what ways did researching the problems on campus affect your sense of belonging, pride and/or ‘ownership’ of LaGuardia Community College as your school?” – was designed to tap into the specific contribution of the research project
to the processes of place attachment. Based on Vaske and Kobrin’s research, I had hypothesized that the investigative quality of the project would affect the dimension of place identity rather than place dependence. As illustrated in the following comments, the majority of responses supported this hypothesis: 20 students (71%) described increased pride and integration within the school:

- I actually feel like I’m a part of the college now. I am a very shy person and when I did my research, it actually helped me to realize that even though I am shy I can still do things for the college. So that this college can be a better place. Doing the research actually made me think about other things I can volunteer on to make the college better.
- While conducting research on one of the university’s problems, I began to feel positive and more proud of being a fellow LaGuardian who contributed to enhancing the overall school’s experience.
- This project made me feel belonging to a higher force, caring for LaGuardia students and what they feel. I basically felt like a group leader for those who stay in the dark with questions.
- I felt respected when I introduced myself to other students and they paid attention to my questions.

Two students described negative shifts in their sense of pride in the school as a result of participating in the research: “I . . . become ashamed to be a part of LAGCC because the people that work here are very unpleasant and have nasty attitudes.” Another suggested that the efficacy gained by working hard on the project was dampened by the improbability that his suggestions would ever be implemented: “After my research I didn’t feel like I was entitled to anything, really.” Some students began to think more deeply about larger issues, such as the nature of change, and one’s complex relationship to institutional issues and problems:

- It opened my eyes on the problems that the school has, especially after the research. I understood that it is also my problem, because I am a part of the community as well.
- I guess doing the research of photocopier machines made me realize that we need to be patient waiting for others in line, and also be
considerate of others who are waiting in line while we made copies. On the other hand, it is always good to speak up if we need to make a change for better service to students.

- It didn’t affect me, really, because for something to change will take a long time.

The third survey question – “What was the hardest part of the research project?” – provided helpful feedback on the project’s design and identified ways to provide additional support to students when implementing similar projects in the future. The most common difficulty, cited by 13 students (46%), arose in recruiting fellow students to respond to their surveys. Other difficulties included writing appropriate survey questions (3 students), organizing and writing up the data (2 students), working effectively in groups (2 students), identifying psychological theory that related to the topic of inquiry (1 student), picking a topic that mattered the most (1 student), and writing the letter (1 student). Students became invested in demonstrating the validity of their research concerns. Perhaps because they were given the opportunity to communicate directly with the college administration, they extended themselves at each step of the process. As one student put it, “The hardest part was creating the letter, especially because I worked to get all my feelings about the Writing Center across in the letter, and I wanted them to know it was important to me.”

The objective of the final question was to measure broadly the achievement of self-efficacy. Students who felt that they knew how to address a problem and felt that they could do so effectively would be most likely to transfer their skills to other situations. Responses were overwhelmingly positive. Offered a five-point Likert scale to indicate the likelihood of contacting the college administrative staff in the future event of a need or problem, students responded as follows:

1. I definitely would 10 students (36%)
2. I would consider it 17 students (61%)
3. Not sure what I’d do 0 students (0%)
4. Not very likely 1 student (3%)
5. I definitely would not 0 students (0%)
While these numbers may not directly signal future student activism, they do suggest that the research project altered self-perception in the direction of considering solutions when encountering problems related to the physical and social dimensions of the environment. Interestingly, many more students responded “I definitely would [contact administrative staff]” than actually submitted their written letters to be read by administrators. I credit their experience of meeting a responsive administrator who showed interest in their research and took it seriously with influencing the students’ later responses and inspiring in them a belief in their ability to effect needed change. Environmental efficacy, especially in its initial expressions, is a social rather than an individual quality.

Reflections on Teaching

I did not ask students to choose research topics that related to environmental sustainability issues. I felt that they would gain more by doing a project that had intrinsic meaning to them. In retrospect, I am satisfied with this approach. However, in the future, I may add a section to the report in which they explicitly consider the environmental implications of their research. This requirement would facilitate more critical thinking about their topics and lead to deeper understanding of administrative efforts to institute environmentally responsible changes.

The data analysis section was the weakest part of the research reports. Some students presented mixed survey responses as though they were in unanimous agreement with the student’s own position; others glossed over the differences between the observational and the survey data they collected. A central objective of any introductory psychology course is the development of the students’ ability to organize and evaluate evidence and to make appropriate inferences from it, but this is a difficult skill to master. The students struggled, but the fact that they were working with data they had collected themselves provided additional motivation. Their success might have been enhanced by the provision of more explicit instructions, a more detailed grading rubric, and additional opportunities for in-class collaborative work.

The overall student anxiety surrounding collecting survey responses needs to be addressed. I had suggested that students distribute the surveys to classmates within our psychology class and observed this happening on a number of occasions. Nevertheless, many students went
outside the class, in part because some projects benefitted from targeted sampling. For instance, students understandably preferred to approach people waiting in line to use the copy machines, or students who had actually used the workout room. In the future, I may need to provide class time during which students could complete each others’ surveys. I may also need to spend more time enforcing ethical guidelines for the project. I should note that some students reported that they had benefitted from overcoming their trepidation at approaching others, which is a benefit I would like to preserve.

Finally, the project required much more time and support than I had anticipated. Regularly reviewing questions took up considerable amounts of class time. Students were initially hesitant to ask for individual help, or to admit that they had not begun the work; so I used class time to address common concerns and encourage students in their efforts. Despite my best intentions, the project did crowd out class discussion of other items on the syllabus. I also found that integrating place learning into the flow of the General Psychology class took effort. In the future, I would include in the syllabus a unit on stress, which seemed pervasive in student experience.

Reflections on Promoting Environmentally Responsible Behavior

The evidence from this class project suggests that students do indeed become attached to LaGuardia Community College as a place for learning, in a process mediated by positive experiences in classes, with faculty, with other students, and with the many services and activities that constitute the life of LaGuardia Community College. That is, the school’s effectiveness in meeting students’ educational goals is appreciated as place dependency. Furthermore, students’ sense of attachment also includes dimensions of place identity, meaning that they associate aspects of their own developing identity with experiences in the school. According to Vaske and Kobrin, although the two dimensions of place attachment often go hand in hand, it is the sense of emotional identification with a place that provides the extra impetus to change behavior. It follows from the theory that the more the school helps students develop personal qualities that they want to have – in this case discipline, engagement, and goal orientation – the more likely they will identify with environmental behavior standards that they also encounter in college.
In shaping place attachment, architectural limitations can be overcome through improved communication with students by both teaching and non-teaching staff. For instance, students who feel that they have been given “the runaround,” as they are sent from office to office to resolve a difficulty, will feel less injured by the unfortunate mapping of the campus if they are treated with solicitude and respect in each office they visit. Similarly, teachers can more than make up for the awkward commute between classrooms by showing that they are both knowledgeable about their fields and interested in student development.

Vulnerable areas for student attachment are suggested by the topics that students chose to address. Primary among these were financial concerns and the availability of the services that the college advertises. It is clear that full financial backing and rich student support services would best fulfill these needs. However, my class experience suggests that, simply by being more frank in dialogues relating to student and college finances and by allowing the students to partner in decision-making processes, the College would reap the benefits of increased attachment and commitment from the students.

The participatory nature of the project, in which students both conducted their own research and were participants in that of others, raised not only their skill levels and their feelings of self-efficacy but also their sense of dignity. Furthermore, it permitted an empowering elevation from the usual role of learner to that of collaborator in improving education on campus, and contributed much to a change in attitudes toward the problems they researched, the school as a whole, and themselves. These attitude changes could no doubt be applied toward increasing the students’ environmentally responsible behavior.

In summary, the more strongly the college sustains student learning and development, the more success it can claim in creating students who in turn care about the college and actively defend its environment. An effective and affordable education (if such can be sustained in these times of severe budgetary constraint), scaffolded by a more collaborative relationship among faculty, administration, and students, should promote increased levels of campus-wide participation in environmentally responsible practices. Such an education should also heighten the will of all members of the college community to make the personal adaptations required by such practices and ultimately enhance a sense of pride in being part of a college committed to environmental awareness.
Works Consulted


Inequities in Public Education

Sustainability Threatened

Janet Michello, Social Science

It is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.

Brown v. Board of Education, Supreme Court of the US

Unless we adequately educate all segments of American society, our individual and collective abilities to sustain ourselves economically will be severely compromised. This article addresses the status of public education in the United States and raises questions about its capacity to meet the educational requirements of future generations. Since every society’s future is tied to its educational system, it is essential that we respond critically to the segregation and discrimination that still exist in many American public schools. As a sociologist, I make that critical evaluation a part of my Introduction to Sociology (SSS100) classes at LaGuardia Community College. Two recent volunteer experiences have fueled assignments which I developed for this course.

Over the years that I have taught sociology at LaGuardia, I have volunteered in a number of educational settings. In August 2007, I volunteered for two weeks with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in St. Louis, Missouri, in an impoverished, struggling school district whose students were largely African American. I worked directly with teachers, providing emotional support and hands-on help as they prepared classrooms for the approaching school year with very limited resources. In 2009, I volunteered closer to home, as a judge at the annual New York City Science and Engineering Fair (NYCSEF). My experience in St. Louis sharpened my awareness of how the terms “failing schools” is often tied to schools serving people of color. I subsequently brought that heightened awareness to the Science Fair where I was sensitive to which groups were contenders at the Science Fair and which groups were not. This paper describes in further detail the nature
of my volunteer experiences in St. Louis public schools and at the New York City Science and Engineering Fair, what I learned from them about public education, and how I incorporated these lessons in my Introduction to Sociology classes at LaGuardia Community College.

In St. Louis, I joined educators from around the country, recruited by the AFT, to assist in their “back-to-school” efforts which focused on failing schools located in low-income neighborhoods and in need of practical and moral support. Upon arrival in St. Louis, we became aware that the predominately African American St. Louis public schools had recently lost accreditation because of low test scores, and had two school boards – one elected and one appointed by the mayor. We also learned that high school students, parents, and teachers had protested the state takeover of their schools in the spring of 2007, just two short months before graduation, and had conducted five days of sit-ins at the mayor’s office. Many graduating students feared that, as graduates of now nonaccredited high schools, they would lose their places in the colleges where they had been accepted. We discovered that students had been arrested for their protest actions, sprayed with mace by the police, subjected to insults and demeaning behavior, and lied to by public officials.

One of the ways we assisted the St. Louis schools in their back-to-school efforts was by helping first-year teachers set up their classrooms. In some cases, the enterprise turned out to be more than challenging since the teachers were issued very limited supplies. In some classrooms, we hung colorful borders, cut out pictures, and helped arrange educational material, but in one school, we made the display borders ourselves out of hand-me-down construction paper since there were no funds to purchase anything. In another classroom, we assisted a teacher with great supplies but quickly discovered that she had purchased them with her own money: A brand new teacher who had not even received her first paycheck had already spent $250 on materials that should have been provided by the school district. In another school, although teachers appreciated our decorating skills, we found that some of them had a different request – for help with various computer tasks. One problem we could not solve was that not enough computers had been issued to the teachers, yet they were expected to access lesson plans online via the school’s intranet. One teacher we assisted told us that
the computer she was working on at school was a personal computer she brought from home.

In 2009, I joined other City University of New York professors invited to be judges at that year’s New York City Science and Engineering Fair (NYCSEF). The fair is the “largest high school research competition in NYC [and] is sponsored by the New York City Department of Education and the City University of New York.” In the words of Jeanette Kim, director of the 2009 fair, it showcased work based on research in “categories including the biological sciences, behavioral and social sciences, physical sciences, computer sciences, engineering, and mathematics.”

This highly organized event featured inviting displays by 500 students and made me wish to jump into my assignment to evaluate projects that related to the social sciences. However, I decided, before starting to look at individual projects, to get an overview of the entire fair. I walked up and down the aisles, scanning the projects and the young scientists. That was when I noticed that something was missing. To make sure that I was not seeing something that could not be substantiated, I started taking pictures. As evidenced by my observations and photos, there were few Hispanics or blacks competing in the fair. Blacks were the very group that populated the troubled St. Louis public schools and both Hispanics and blacks were well represented in my LaGuardia classes. According to the “Fall 2009 Ethnicity Breakdown” in LaGuardia’s 2010 Institutional Profile, 41% of LaGuardia students in that semester were Hispanic and 17% were black.

Lessons from the Field
Segregation and Discrimination in Public Schools
Initially surprised by the absence of groups prominent in my classes, I remembered that the New York City Science and Engineering Fair traditionally represents the most academically prepared students often coming from New York City’s elite public schools. It is well known that the populations in these schools do not reflect the diversity of New York City school students. A 2008 New York Times article, “Racial Imbalance Persists at Elite Public Schools,” reports these statistics:

In this city [New York] of 1.1 million public school students, about 40 percent are Hispanic, 32 percent are black, 14 per-
cent are Asian and 14 percent white. More than two-thirds of Stuyvesant High School’s 3,247 students are Asian (up from 48 percent in 1999). At Brooklyn Technical High School, 365 of the 4,669 students, or 8 percent, are Hispanic; at the Bronx High School of Science, there are 114 blacks, 4 percent of the 2,809-student body. (Hernandez)

Thus, my observations in St. Louis and at the Science Fair reminded me of the segregation that exists in public education despite the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision. Jonathan Kozol wrote in 2006 that “[s]egregation has returned to public education with a vengeance;” he backed his claim by noting that the “percentage of black children who now go to integrated schools has dropped to its lowest level since 1968.” Pointing a finger at New York State and New York City, Kozol wrote:

New York State is the most segregated state for black and Latino children in America: seven out of eight black and Latino kids here go to segregated schools. The majority of them go to schools where no more than two to four percent of the children are white....The level of segregation statewide is due largely to New York City, which is probably the country’s most segregated city.

In a 2009 report entitled *Reviving the Goal of an Integrated Society: A 21st Century Challenge*, Gary Orfield, Professor of Education and co-director of the Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles at UCLA, writes about the implications of the resegregation of American education: “Segregated black and Latino schools have less prepared teachers and classmates, and lower achievement and graduation. Segregated nonwhite schools usually are segregated by poverty as well as race” (6).

Recently, a new twist has been added to an already highly inequitable institution: More local school districts require visas and passports to register children. Twenty-eight years after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that all children have a right to public education regardless of whether they are in the country legally (Plyler), the New York Civil Liberties Union “surveyed New York State’s 694 school districts...
and discovered that at least 139 are asking, either directly or indirectly, for proof of a parent or child’s immigration status before a student may be enrolled in school” (“NYCLU”). Requiring documentation such as social security numbers, visas, passports, and citizenship status to register students is clearly against the law yet apparently common practice in many school districts, adding another layer to the level of inequity in public education.

Statistics pointing to New York City’s failure to prepare large groups of students to enter competitive arenas are part of a wider national failure signaled by high school dropout rates in the United States. In remarks made to a joint session of Congress on February 24, 2009, President Barack Obama cited the statistics and emphasized the potentially dire consequences of the United States high school dropout rate:

In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity – it is a pre-requisite.

Right now, three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma. And yet, just over half of our citizens have that level of education. We have one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized nation. And half of the students who begin college never finish.

This is a prescription for economic decline, because we know the countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow. That is why it will be the goal of this administration to ensure that every child has access to a complete and competitive education – from the day they are born to the day they begin a career.

In my Introduction to Sociology classes, my students’ accounts of their own experiences in public education, combined with my experiences in St. Louis and at the New York City Science and Engineering Fair, have intensified my concern that public education, increasingly characterized by racial segregation and other inequities, is failing to prepare large segments of the population to enter and excel in competitive arenas. Ultimately, that failure poses a threat to the livelihood of individuals. According to Kaleem Caire, President and CEO of the Black Alliance for Educational Options, “[c]hildren who do not graduate with a high
school diploma stand little chance of sustaining themselves or a family in today’s economy” (i). On a larger scale, as articulated by President Obama and noted above, the failure threatens the ability of the United States to sustain itself in the global marketplace.

Lessons in the Classroom
At LaGuardia Community College, students in Introduction to Sociology (SSS100) are mostly Liberal Arts majors, fulfilling a requirement of their major. They frequently take the course during their first year at the college, often entering the course with a great deal of personal experience in and very little academic knowledge about a subject central to sociology – the impact of societal institutions on groups and individuals.

One of my goals in teaching Introduction to Sociology is to provide students with an understanding of the roles of institutions. I also wish to heighten student awareness of the role of activism in ensuring that American institutions fulfill their roles equitably. In order to fulfill these goals, I ground my lessons in difficult-to-teach sociological theory. In introductory sociology classes, the syllabus covers dominant theoretical viewpoints, both macro (the social structure or organization of society) and micro (how social organization impacts the individual). Generally, I attempt to present opposing viewpoints – one side focusing on the expected order of things and how equilibrium needs to be maintained, especially when change is occurring, and the other side focusing on issues of power, control, domination, and how change may occur to benefit a few at the expense of the many.

Understanding theory – what constitutes a theory and theoretical assumptions, how theories are formulated and applied, how theories change – is often new and difficult for students. They generally have difficulty comprehending that differing points of view can be applied to the same situation and that neither is “right” or “wrong.” Usually students want to think that one position is the correct one and the other incorrect. In Introduction to Sociology, students are encouraged to see theories, different sociological viewpoints, as tools for understanding behavior or phenomena.

For example, students are introduced to structural functionalism, sometimes referred to as functionalism, a major sociological theory popularized at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of
the twentieth century by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim. Durkheim asserted that society was like an organism and “much the way each organ in the body contributes to the survival of the organism, each part of a society contributes to the successful functioning of society” (Pampel 74). This paradigm also suggests that societal institutions, analogous to spokes on a wheel, provide the necessary structure and support needed by society. And just as a wheel becomes unbalanced if a spoke breaks, so does society suffer if its institutions do not function properly. By applying functionalism to a real-life situation such as public education that is not fulfilling its societal obligations, students can come to appreciate the necessity of remedying educational problems and the need to implement reform quickly in order for America to keep up with the rapid technological and economic advances taking place in other countries.

On the other hand, conflict theory helps students appreciate how disregard for the inequities in public schools, especially as they affect lower-income and minority students, relates to the power structure of American institutions. Conflict theory, originating in the ideas of Karl Marx, stresses imbalance of power within a society, struggle over resources, and control by people in positions enabling them to exercise it. From a conflict viewpoint, institutions are structured to benefit those in positions of power at the expense of those on the opposite side of the spectrum. Students therefore learn the significance of the frequently applied sociological adage that, in order for significant social change to occur, it must occur at the institutional level. Thus, with regard to civil rights, for example, individuals did not change racist ways; the government had to pass legislation. Similarly, with regard to the economy, government involvement is needed to foster hoped-for recovery.

**From Theory to Application**

Classroom discussion and research assignments are important to my application of sociological theory to the problem of failing schools. I often try to use the students’ first-hand experiences with societal institutions as a starting point for the academic study of those institutions. Reviewing the structure and functions of the institution of education provides for lively discussions in Introduction to Sociology classes. As we approach assignments focusing on educational institutions, students tell their stories. Prominent in the stories of students who went to public
schools in New York City are accounts of violence and attempts on the part of school personnel to prevent violence. Students sometimes comment on how some of their classmates obtained good grades and were promoted merely by not being disruptive in school. For students at LaGuardia Community College who attended schools in other countries before coming to the United States, the topics of searches, metal detectors, weapons, and violence are surprising. In their countries of origin, such searches and violations of privacy are unheard of.

A very important point regarding the structure of institutions, including the institution of education, is that institutions typically reproduce ideas of the privileged while disadvantaged groups frequently remain passive (Margolis et al. 7). As a means of helping students understand this point and to illustrate what happens when people take action rather than remain passive, I give the students information about the St. Louis school system. I provide a verbal account of my 2007 experiences. I assign a *New York Times* article, “State Takes Control of Troubled Public Schools in St. Louis” (Gay) in addition to the chapter about the institution of education in the Introduction to Sociology text, *Society: The Basics* (Macionis). Students also read a paper I wrote and presented at the 2007 annual meeting of the New York State Sociological Association, “A Case Study of Advocacy at St. Louis Public Schools.” Finally, students view a live *YouTube* video clip about the 2007 five-day sit-in at the office of St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay (*Exclusive*). The St. Louis experience specifically shows the failure of an educational institution to promote a fair and equal society and to address adequately issues that concern primarily people of color. The St. Louis experience also illustrates advocacy that was successful in addressing that failure. Having set the stage, I go on to place students’ experiences with public education and the experience in St. Louis in a broader context, one that requires an understanding of sociological theories.

**Research Assignment**

In addition to grounding the students in basic sociological theory, the Introduction to Sociology course seeks also to train students in skills essential to sociological research. As part of a research assignment, I have students apply sociological theory after assessing educational data on the website of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). By reviewing the NCES’s *Characteristics of the 100 Largest
Public Elementary and Secondary School Districts in the United States: 2008–09 (Sable, Plotts, and Mitchell) and their locations on maps available through the School District Demographics System of the National Center for Education Statistics, they must determine the following:

- locations of the country’s largest school districts and student enrollment in each
- overall ethnicity of students in the largest school districts
- number of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals (as an indication of students’ family income)
- high school graduation rates by states identified
- how graduation rates are calculated

After they find answers to the above questions, I ask students to reflect on what they have learned by applying some of the assumptions of conflict theory mentioned above and to include their reactions to the discovery of the composition of school districts across the United States and national graduation statistics.

The second part of the research assignment asks students to review national and international data on the NCES website (“Fast Facts”; US NCES. Condition 86, 210). Here they review and compare the following:

- America’s mathematics and reading literacy rankings with those of other world nations
- how the number of scientists in the United States compares internationally

Again, after the students find answers to these questions, I ask them to reflect on what they have learned, this time by applying some of the aforementioned assumptions of functionalist theory. I also ask them to write about their reactions to the international rankings and the number of scientists worldwide. This assignment encourages students to research socioeconomic, residential, and international data and to reflect on quality of education and the consequences of educational inequities. The assignment also encourages them to think critically about educational outcomes, including some of the consequences of inequities in public education, and to apply sociological theories by
engaging in abstract thinking. And, not unintentionally, the assignment also engages students in quantitative reasoning with the goal of increased quantitative literacy.

Such an assignment contributes not only to the development of basic academic skills and important life skills but also to the empowerment of students who, often, have been the victims of inequities in their education. In a report on the requirements of 21st century education, the Center for Public Education (CPE) stresses the importance of acquiring traditional academic skills, including science, social studies, and strong math and English skills, in order to succeed in work and life (Jerald). In addition, based on employer surveys and other evidence, the CPE identified four kinds of “broader competencies” that are essential today:

- The ability to solve new problems and think critically;
- Strong interpersonal skills necessary for communication and collaboration;
- Creativity and intellectual flexibility; and
- Self sufficiency, including the ability to learn new things when necessary (Jerald).

Students who have attended failing schools often internalize the failure of those schools. It is especially important for these students to see the sociological reasons for their poor preparation for college and to see where American public education stands in relation to education in other societies. Conducting the research makes vivid and clear to students sociological concepts and how they can be viewed from different perspectives. Thus, from a functionalist viewpoint, the education system should be doing a better job. From a conflict perspective, the institution of education is there to enhance the role of people in power and not necessarily designed to benefit students from all walks of life. My Introduction to Sociology course is designed not only to teach students the skills associated with the discipline, but also the outlooks and theories that will help them understand critical information in order to make sound decisions and empower them to take action in the face of inequities.
Conclusion

In the fall of 2008, according to the 2009 *Digest of Education Statistics* compiled by the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics, nearly 50 million students (Table 2) headed off to approximately 99,000 public elementary and secondary schools (Table 5), and before the school year was over, an estimated $596 billion would be spent on their education (Table 27). The societal goal of the institution of education is to transmit knowledge, to teach all students skills and values that will enable them to live fulfilling lives, participate in the labor force, and contribute to the functioning of society. As a nation, we may wish to ponder what the consequences will be of not adequately educating minority children when, in the not too distant future, the minority population will be the majority. The United States Census Bureau recently released revised projections for the composition of the population over the next three decades. By the 2040s, minorities will make up more than one-half of the United States population, up from the present 34%. The largest gains will be in the Latino, Asian, and African American sectors (“U.S. Minorities”).

Although public education in the United States remains discriminatory and segregated, and fails to meet the needs of countless numbers of low-income students, mainly students of color, changes in educational outcomes are still possible. It will take considerable effort from many different segments of society to make a significant impact; one technique with far-reaching potential is to bring lessons from the field into the sociology classroom.

**WORKS CONSULTED**


Kim, Jeanette. Letter to the author. 11 Mar. 2009. TS.


Mindfulness in the Arts
A Conversation

Hugo Fernandez, Humanities

The following is an edited transcription of a conversation I moderated on February 3, 2010 on my radio show, “How It Works,” on LaGuardia Web Radio, WLGCC. “How It Works” is a weekly radio show I began in 2008. It is dedicated to highlighting personalities throughout the LaGuardia community and the great work they are doing. The participants in the February 3rd program represent the Visual Arts area of the LaGuardia Community College Humanities department. We are practitioners in two- and three-dimensional arts, educators with over eighty combined years of experience in the field. The topic for this discussion, “mindfulness,” emerged from the most recent call for papers from In Transit: The LaGuardia Journal on Teaching and Learning and discussions in the 2009–10 Carnegie Seminar on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, conducted at LaGuardia by Professors Evelyn Burg, and Sigmund Shen, and Dr. Michele Piso, under the direction of the College’s Center for Teaching and Learning.

When I hear the term “mindfulness,” I relate it to this argument: All undergraduate college students should take an introductory art course in order to learn to “see” rather than simply to “look at” artwork and the world. To “see” implies a greater depth of understanding, while to “look at” suggests a passive lack of attention. It can be argued that many people go through their lives visually illiterate and that core art instruction can lead to a greater engagement not only with art, but also with life.

In preparation for the conversation, I came up with two questions: What is mindfulness? How does art teach mindfulness? The participants were: Bruce Brooks, Director of the Visual Arts Area and Professor of Visual Arts; Hugo Fernandez, Lecturer in the Visual Arts, moderator; Michael Rodriguez, Chair of the Humanities department and Professor of Visual Arts; and Scott Sternbach, Director of the Photography program and Professor of Photography.
Hugo Fernandez (HF): Within the topic of mindfulness in teaching and learning, we’re going to focus predominantly on the idea of mindfulness and how the visual arts, maybe the arts in general, can teach mindfulness. What definitions do you have for mindfulness?

Bruce Brooks (BB): If you talk about mindfulness, you’re talking about awareness, I think, and consciousness, like being aware of what you are doing. Take the notion of negative space. For example, if we name a chair a chair, we always see a chair as a chair, never beyond that. So we never really see the form of the chair, or the negative spaces of the chair.

I tried a simple experiment. I asked students to describe a traffic light. The classic definition of a traffic light is three circles, red, yellow, and green. And to ask students to go beyond that is to ask these questions: What does the design of the traffic light look like? Where is the light in relation to where you are in the car or standing on the street corner? They don’t really know. As they set out to draw the light, they’re very uncertain. They know there are three circles, but they don’t know what the actual form looks like. So I ask them, what does it mean that we don’t know what a traffic light looks like?

The case is we live in a world where there are so many stimuli all the time. There’s noise and tons of visual stuff. You stand on a street corner in New York; every mode of transportation exists, except antigravity pods, and even they might be there as far as I know. There’s a lot of noise. You go by a newsstand. You know, when I was in high school, there would be like 15 newspapers and 3 magazines. Now there are 10,000 magazines and like two newspapers. So in order to protect ourselves from completely going insane, we learn to screen things out and we learn to focus on things that have names. So when we look at a traffic light, we screen out everything that is unnecessary. All that’s important is to stop, go, and go faster (that’s the yellow light). We learn that and we learn that deeply.

We take a moment and go out to the street to take a closer look at a traffic light, or a fire hydrant, for that matter. And we’ll
discover that there are many different types and they have different kinds of features. Some have words on the lights, some have little bars that flash, some hang in the middle of the road, and some are attached to a sign. There are many different variations.

What we try to do with art, certainly in drawing, certainly when we’re drawing from life, we’re trying to take greater note of what we are looking at. We have to try to blow past what we’re used to doing and move into unknown territory. Negative space is really unknown territory.

So we spend 90% of the day not drawing. We spend 90% of the day trying to cross the street while not getting run over. Eventually we get to the point where we tune out automatically, just because of repetition and age. But what we try to do in drawing is make students aware of the fact that they really can see these things.

Sherlock Holmes said to Watson, “You see, but you fail to observe.”

HF: I was teaching a class yesterday, and talking about the Renaissance, and I showed one of Durer’s inventions, a glass frame containing a grid [through which the artist viewed his subject], and a tall, thin eyepiece [for focusing]. The artist would have to put the eyepiece near his eye in order to render a drawing correctly; this perspective device was one of Durer’s ways of showing other artists how he did what he did, because people would look at his work and think it was magic. But let’s get some of the other folks here to chime in on the issue of mindfulness. Do you agree with Bruce? Is attention the definition of mindfulness? Is there anything we can add?

BB: I can only relate mindfulness to my own working process and what state of mind I’d rather be in when I am working in my studio. Mindfulness is elevation of one’s consciousness. It is about being fully conscious in the moment.

Michael Rodriguez (MR): The transition from my office to my studio is sometimes a difficult transition because the state of mind when I’m making artwork is the state of mind of being fully aware of the physical manifestation of what I am trying to make. For me, the most gratifying moments are when the students draw for two hours at a stretch without taking a break. If they can do that
and roll that kind of attentiveness into their studies or their other courses, then they’ve really accomplished something.

There are different levels of consciousness. I think human consciousness is geared toward the task at hand. I think that’s a reason there are monasteries and places where people practice religion in seclusion because you can’t attend to the day-to-day things of life – it’s hard to be in the light of God and worry about your taxes. You know what I mean.

BB: When you’ve been painting for thirty years or forty years, to get into that state that Michael is talking about takes a lot of work, because you have a lot of accumulated stuff to work through.

HF: I show Weston’s2 “Pepper,” and I talk about mindfulness. The students look at that photo and, first of all, they don’t even know that it is a pepper, and then they say, “Oh, what a wild pepper.” Then we start talking about when you go to the grocery store, what do you start looking for in a pepper? What constitutes the right one? What did Weston go looking for at the supposed grocery store? Why did he choose that one, not your average pepper?

Scott Sternbach (SS): It’s funny that you mention Weston, because I speak about Weston all the time and if anyone was mindful about photography and art, it was Weston. The word that comes to mind for me when I think of mindfulness is a sense of respect, overall respect: in other words, taking the time to respect your peers, the craft of photography, the tools you use, and your subject. Weston took all of his subjects seriously, even the pepper. He studied it for hours and hours, and photographed it in many different backgrounds.

It’s the overall sense of respect and that sense of awareness about everything, not just art, but the entire world around us. In my classroom, we learn to respect each other during our critiques; we learn to respect our equipment, to keep it in good order; and we, again, respect our subjects, choosing to be as aware about

For me the most gratifying moments are when the students draw for two hours at a stretch without taking a break. If they can do that and roll that kind of attentiveness into their studies or their other courses, then they’ve really accomplished something.

– Michael Rodriguez
them as possible. We give our subjects an incredible amount of thought. That's what I try to teach in the classroom.

HF: I think when you talk about Weston and think about attention, it brings up all these other ideas about having the ability to turn off unnecessary stimuli from the outside world. The ones who end up being very good, they can turn things off in the middle of a crowded room. All unnecessary information gets shut off and all they see is the next subject.

MR: I always tell my students, “Inspiration is for amateurs.” It’s not like I have to get into this very rarified, meditative, mindful head space to work. Some days you just go in and you work, and some days it’s just a technical thing. Some days I might as well be grouting the tile. I have to pay very close attention to technique. That is its own kind of mindfulness. You have to really pay attention. I didn’t want to make art making out like it was some kind of mystical or spiritual thing. Art is material, period. It’s not spiritual at all. It’s physical.

BB: Those Jasper Johns Gray paintings amaze me. They touch a spirituality which is next to impossible in our culture. We’re not a spiritual culture. We’re a material culture. African sculpture comes from a spiritual base. Art Brut, the outsider art, comes from a spiritual base. But you probably do the same thing I do, which is have like a whole bunch of things going all at once because if I just walk into the studio and concentrate on one thing, then I’m really at a loss.

MR: Actually I don’t do that. I work on one thing at a time. I do one painting at a time. I average one a month, so we differ that way.

HF: We’ve moved into the second question: How do we teach mindfulness?

SS: I use the camera to show the students how to slow things down and be more mindful about taking a portrait. When you are just learning about photography, slowing down the process and breaking it down into its parts is important. For instance, the other day, I set up my camera and we did some portraits of people who work at LaGuardia. It was very slow; it was quiet in the studio; it was a very meditative state.

BB: Scott does large format photography; he uses an 8” x 10” Dardorff camera, sort of like the Rolls-Royce of camera experiences.
Everything you can do with a camera is right there, and you can just show them. I remember someone who used to use television – back in the day when we had television as we knew it – when you could turn the TV on and show students, “This is contrast,” and you’d turn the contrast up and you’d have black and white shapes, and you’d turn the contrast down and introduce grey tones and add volume, and when you eliminate the contrast, it’s flat, it’s like nothing is there at all – which is the same thing when you talk about drawing: you use contrast to create space in a drawing, and you use value, which is light and dark, to create volume and weight.

SS: I could mention a photographer named Minor White. When we critique our images now, we follow his technique: Rather than putting the photographs up on a wall, or laying them out on a table and looking at them all at one time, what I’ve done is I’ve spotlighted the image: I put a spotlight on one central area on a table and darken the rest of the room.

HF: Those posters of the “Faces of LaGuardia” show some photographs of you actually doing your “spotlight critiques.”

SS: There are posters around the college that show us doing spotlight critiques and I’ve found those spotlight critiques highly effective, because they take away all the distractions and allow students to focus, and in today’s world of constant texting and all that other stuff that goes on, it’s nice to be quiet, dark, and focused on one thing, and, of course, the cell phones are off.

HF: That’s a priority for you.

SS: That’s a priority, no texting, no cell phones in the classroom.

BB: The thing about the mindfulness and the focus issue: One of the books that I have students read a lot in a lot of my classes is Zen in the Art of Archery, by Eugen Herrigel. In the book, the student is learning to shoot the arrow, release the arrow, and if he does it incorrectly, it goes “Twang,” like “breath . . . expelled explosively” (53). It goes all over the place. He cannot get it. So he goes over to watch the sensei [elder] do it. The sensei shoots his

*The word that comes to mind for me when I think of mindfulness is a sense of respect, overall respect. In other words, taking the time to respect your peers, the craft of photography, the tools you use, and your subject.*

– Scott Sternbach
In Transit

arrow and it goes “Pheuuu,” breath glid[ing] effortlessly” (53). The student (Herrigel) copies the mechanics of the sensei. So he goes back and he tries it, and it works. He’s totally proud. So he runs up to the sensei and he says, “I think I’ve finally got it.” The sensei says, “Show me.” He strings the bow and shoots the arrow. It’s a perfect shot. The sensei grabs the bow and yanks it out of his hand and he says, “Get out of my school; I’m not going to teach a charlatan.” Eugen Herrigel is completely confused, “What did I do wrong?” So one of the black belt dudes says, “Come back later and talk to him at night.” So he [Herrigel] does and he comes back and he asks, “Well, what did I do wrong?” He said, “What you did was you copied my way of shooting the arrow; you didn’t solve the problem yourself. Sure it [the technique used by the sensei and copied by Herrigel] worked; I’ve been doing this all my life. But it was dishonest, and it was like a charlatan. What you don’t realize is that the bull’s-eye is already hit. You’re too concerned with hitting the bull’s-eye and shooting the arrow right and you’re not into the process” (Herrigel 50–51). Now this is what we’re talking about, the process.

HF: You’re talking about the process. We’re talking about mindfulness.

MR: They’re inextricable. You want to be mindful during the process and the process should create mindfulness.

In class, I frequently really frustrate students because they are so used to beginning and finishing, the goal is to finish, and they want to finish the drawing, and I just try to get them to slow down, not to rush. Also, they want to talk about their grades. I tell them, “I’m not interested in talking about your grades; it’s not about the grade.” When they’re doing a still life and they’ve been painting for an hour and they’re saying, “Professor, I’m finished,” I say, “You have no idea what it is to be really finished. You’ve just started.”

BB: You are reminding me of Eliot Eisner. He’s an educator; he’s kind of brilliant. He says that one of the things about studying art, and he doesn’t just mean only the visual arts – he’s talking about other art forms as well – is that, there is more than one solution to

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I want to always tell my students it’s their own idiosyncratic natures that are going to make the work interesting; I tell them to just trust themselves.

– Michael Rodriguez
a problem, and what we’re talking about is that there are many, many solutions.

So also, in order to teach a class, you have to be ready to go in any direction to be able to understand what students are doing. The student solution is always individual. In standardized testing, there’s one answer, and everyone conforms to learning that one answer. So they learn to take the test, but they’re not solving any problems. They’re remembering how to take the test and what might be the right answer.

Art becomes a very scary proposition for people when they start and they have little or no experience, because they start with a blank sheet of paper and they’re expected to make form or something from nothing. As Michael was saying, too, you really don’t know when the drawing is finished, and to try to get students to use an eraser is difficult; they associate the eraser with the wrong answer in math. You erase the wrong answer, put the right answer down. But an eraser is a drawing tool; it’s a way of removing material from the paper. So you add material, you remove material. You add clay, you take it away. The resistance to using that eraser is unbelievable.

HF: What about when a teacher takes the eraser away, and a student makes a mistake; the student is going to have to fix it.

BB: That’s a technique, but I’ve decided erasing is good. I make them hold a pencil in their left hand and use the eraser with the right hand; students have to draw with their off hand, except lefties, and they have to erase with their right hand. Students are then more likely to try and use the eraser as a tool for creation rather than seeing it as a way of fixing mistakes. I try to tell them that a drawing is like the passage of time, like a jazz piece. A jazz musician knows where he starts, but he doesn’t know where he’s going to end up, and how long it will take. It could take five minutes, it could take 20 minutes.

HF: If it’s Coltrane, it could be an hour and a half.

BB: Coltrane is a great example. But you always have to look at their work with the idea that students are going to move into a new and unique direction that I have to tune in to, as opposed to when I went to art school.
You try to get past that idea that you have to draw the cup so it looks like the cup. You [the student/practitioner] have to able to do a drawing based on the cup and what you see and how deeply you see can be very different than how deeply another sees.

MR: I want to always tell my students that it’s their own idiosyncratic natures that are going to make the work interesting; I tell them to just trust themselves. When they do a drawing, the truth is that no one in the entire history of the world has done a drawing just like that.

HF: Scott, we were talking about this in our Carnegie Seminar last time. Scott is focusing on his intermediate photography class. What’s tough about intermediate photography is that students have to choose a subject themselves and very much of it [the subject] has to be about who they are. Choosing a subject is one of the tough things for students.

SS: They need to have something to say.

HF: But it is also what Bruce talked about. They have to come up with their own solution. I don’t know if you want to talk about what that’s like as a teacher – to poke and prod people to make that happen.

SS: They really need to have something to say, some passion for something, something they love or something they hate, something they can latch onto. I always tell my students, “Look at the pictures. Do they hit you in the gut? If you don’t feel it in your gut, there’s something wrong. That comes from my teacher, Lisette Model. When I studied with her a long time ago, she was an 80-year-old standing up in front of the class, striking her gut. I think it’s really important to open students’ minds up to having some sense of importance, of what’s important to them.

BB: One of the things that I’ve noticed about photographers is that the group sense of camaraderie in departments is always strong – to the extent that they always wear black. They’re always talking about cameras, this photograph, and that series. The only other art place where that really happens, besides in printmaking, which we run rarely, is in sculpting. Everybody is working and everyone can see what everyone is doing in every minute of every class. So before long, there’s a group thing that starts to develop, and students start helping each other; they help each other tech-
nically and they start to talk to each other about their work. In painting as in drawing, everybody is always behind an easel or drawing board.

HF: This is a special show, so I put out in my announcements that people who were listening could ask us questions. Tom Regan asked, “Do you think a student should devote his or her life to art?”

BB: I am remembering a particular student. When I first saw her work, I said to her, “I’m going to tell you something that I don’t often tell students, and that is, you don’t have any choice but to become an artist. Your work is too good to think about the material. You have to just really pursue your work, and you have to go to the best places.” She went from here to Cornell and the Art Institute of Chicago in photography. She’s brilliant, she’s networked, and she’s going to do alright.

I’d like to see LaGuardia have a college-wide beginning drawing requirement. They talk about general education, and we talk about competencies. Nowhere in the competency discussions that I’ve been in have we discussed visual language. Well, you’re talking about material society and survival. But art is an essential thing. The minute you open your eyes and begin to make sense of what you’re looking at, you’re thinking like an artist; you’re trying to make sense of the world visually. But it’s the deepest part of us. A drawing has a beginning, but you don’t know where it is going to end. That’s just like life. We’re born, but we don’t know what’s going to happen; we don’t know when we’re going to die. So every time we work in art, we’re metaphorically or euphemistically dealing with the same issues we deal with in life.

“I’m going to tell you something that I don’t often tell students, and that is, you don’t have any choice but to become an artist. Your work is too good to think about the material. You have to just really pursue your work, and you have to go to the best places.”

– Bruce Brooks
Notes
1. “You see, but you do not observe” comes from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes story, “A Scandal in Bohemia” (162), from where it was tapped for the title of a short story by science fiction writer Robert J. Sawyer.
2. Edward Weston, the great American large-format photographer.
3. This reference is to the early Pop Art master Jasper Johns and a period of his work composed entirely of gray paint, featured at a Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition in 2008 (Vogel).
4. French for “raw art” or “rough art,” phrase used by Jean Dubuffet, the post World War II French painter, to refer to outsider art (Cardinal).
5. Twentieth-century photographer, educator, and the founder of Aperture, the photography magazine and publishing company (Lorenz).
6. “Faces of LaGuardia” is an exhibit of photographs of LaGuardia Community College students, taken by fellow students in the photography program at LaGuardia (“Faces”).
7. Jazz saxophonist who was famous for extremely long solos.
8. Twentieth-century photographer, whose best-known student was Diane Arbus (McDarrah).
9. Adjunct Lecturer in the Humanities Department.

Works Consulted


T.K. Dalton has taught writing courses at LaGuardia since 2008. An adjunct lecturer in the department of English, he has taught developmental writing, composition, journalism, literature, and creative writing for five years. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing (Fiction) from the University of Oregon. His short stories and essays have appeared in Red Rock Review, Rain Taxi, Denver Syntax, High Country News, and Radical Teacher. He is finishing work on his first novel.

Hugo Fernandez received his Associate degree in Communications from Miami Dade Community College, a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Photography from Florida International University, and a Masters in Fine Art Photography from the Yale School of Art. He came to LaGuardia in the mid-1990s and since then has taught in the arts programs within the Humanities department. In 2007, he joined WLGCC, LaGuardia’s Web Radio, where he now hosts the talk show, “How it Works,” a program for campus staff, faculty, and students to discuss current issues.

Thomas Fink, Professor of English at LaGuardia since 1981, holds a BA from Princeton University and a PhD in English from Columbia University. Marsh Hawk Press will publish his seventh book of poetry, Peace Conference, in Spring 2011. His work appears in The Best American Poetry 2007 (Scribner’s). Author of two books of criticism, Fink has also co-edited an anthology on David Shapiro and a literature anthology. His paintings hang in various collections.

Robert Jaffe is a Senior Administrator in the President’s Office at LaGuardia Community College. He came to LaGuardia in February 2009 after having served as an Assistant Secretary for Intergovernmental Affairs in the Office of the New York State Governor. Prior to joining the Governor’s staff, he worked for over ten years as the Executive Vice-President of NARAL Pro-Choice New York and the Institute for Reproductive Health Access. He oversaw the organization’s legislative and electoral agenda and helped launched a range of educational and advocacy programs to improve access to reproductive health care for American women. For over 25 years, he has designed and launched issue-based campaigns on a range of issues, including expanding access
to health care coverage, enhancing funding for child care and mental health services, and improving access to health insurance for people with chronic health conditions.

**Steven Lang** received his PhD in sociology from the Graduate Center at the City University of New York. He is currently an associate professor of urban sociology at LaGuardia Community College. His research is in environmental issues in urban and suburban coastal areas, and he is currently working on a book about the politics of sustainability in the New York coastal zone.

**Anthony Lugo** has an MPA in Public Administration from Baruch College and a BA in World History from Queens College. He serves as the Director of Campus Auxiliary Services and Sustainability in the Division of Administration. He has worked at the College for ten years, having begun as a CUNY Office Assistant. Co-chair of the LaGuardia Sustainability Council, he is responsible for developing the College’s ten-year sustainability plan. He recently attended Harvard’s Management Development program and is a frequent contributor to the College’s newsletter, *LiveWire*.

**Janet Michello** just started her fourteenth year of teaching at LaGuardia Community College. She obtained a Bachelor’s degree in Psychology from Rutgers University, a Master’s degree in Rehabilitation Counseling from Kent State University, and a PhD in Sociology, with a specialty in Medical Sociology, from the University of Akron, in a joint program with Kent State University. She is the author of articles on a wide range of social issues and a workbook, *Urban Sociology*, and co-author of the book, *A Sociology of Mental Illness*. She is currently writing an urban studies book.

**Judi O’Toole** has taught at LaGuardia since the fall of 2006. She is a member of the Natural Sciences department and the Chemical Hygiene Officer for the campus. She holds a BA in Environmental Science from Binghamton University and certifications in hazardous materials handling and environmental compliance. She has been actively involved with the Sustainability Council since its inception and was one of two recipients of the President’s Sustainability Award in 2009.
Abigail Schoneboom taught sociology at LaGuardia from 2004–2010, and is currently teaching at The York Management School (University of York) where she is a Lecturer in Organisational Theory and Behaviour. Her research focuses on the labor process and work-life boundaries. She spent over a decade in the information technology field, including two years with the LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning. She holds a Master of Engineering degree from Oxford University and a PhD in sociology from the City University of New York.

Miriam Shelton is an adjunct lecturer in the department of Social Science. She is a PhD candidate in the Developmental Psychology program at the Graduate Center, CUNY. Her dissertation research topic is “How Clergy Women Get Their Style,” a study about how people exercise creativity in highly constrained situations.

Scott Sternbach has been the Director of Photography in the department of Humanities since 2002. He began his studies at Ohio University and The New School for Social Research and holds a BA degree from City College of New York. Since the age of 20, he has had his work featured in prominent publications. Recent accomplishments include a National Science Foundation Antarctic Fellowship, an exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History, and a grant from the United States Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, which will fund a travel abroad program to Chile in 2012.

Robin Sturtz graduated in 2004 from the University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine. She has been at LaGuardia since 2007, and is the Director of the program in Veterinary Technology. She is the President of the Association for Veterinary Family Practice, and a member of the Association for the Support of Animals and People (a group working with victims of domestic violence who own pets). She continues part-time in clinical feline practice (Cats Rule!). Her special interests include the study of the human-animal bond, and international emerging and zoonotic diseases.
Rosemary Talmadge has led organizational change and planning in the public sector for thirty years, working in large public agencies as a consultant to educational institutions and nonprofit boards, and as director of a regional race relations project. She is currently Director for Organizational Development and Planning in the President’s Office at LaGuardia and a doctoral student in human and organizational development at Fielding Graduate University. Her research interests include transformative learning and perspective transformation.

Shenglan Yuan is currently an Assistant Professor and has taught many levels of math at LaGuardia since 2007. She has also taught at Hunter and Lehman, as well as at New York University and Auburn University. She received her PhD in Mathematics from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Her research interests are in the areas of complex dynamics and hyperbolic geometry. She has been interested in, and has experimented with, various teaching strategies throughout her mathematics career.
About the LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning

The LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) offers faculty-led programs designed to promote innovative teaching, deepen student learning, and advance the scholarship of teaching and learning. Founded in fall 2001 to support professional collaboration, reflection, and exchange, the Center draws upon the expertise of the entire college community to better serve students. The Center helps the college face exciting educational challenges and opportunities, among them the questions raised by new educational technologies, issues of interdisciplinary literacy, and strategies for addressing the rich and growing diversity of our student community.

Working with Center staff, faculty develop and lead a wide range of programs that catalyze transformation throughout LaGuardia, focusing on creative pedagogy and effective integration of new media. More than half of LaGuardia’s full-time academic faculty are engaged in Center programs, as are growing numbers of adjuncts and Continuing Education faculty. The Center supports and coordinates these programs, assisting faculty efforts to connect to each other and to broader national conversations taking place in venues ranging from discipline-based professional associations to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning, the League for Innovation in the Community College, and the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

For more information about the LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning, please visit http://www.lagcc.cuny.edu/ctl.
The LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning
Professional Development Seminars 2010–11

Carnegie Seminar on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
In an interdisciplinary and collaborative professional community, LaGuardia faculty engage in systematic inquiry into their own practice, documenting their work for the purposes of research, reflection, and publication.
Dr. Michele Piso, LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning, and Professor Sigmund Shen, English

Community 2.0: Teaching and Learning Networks
A digital evolution of the traditional learning community model, Community 2.0 supports faculty as they design and implement connections between students that extend both horizontally across disciplines and classes, and vertically across credit levels using Web 2.0 tools.
Professor Ximena Gallardo, English, Craig Kasprzak, LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning, and Professor C. Jason Smith, English

Connected Learning: ePortfolio and Integrative Pedagogy
In conjunction with the College’s move to a new ePortfolio platform in Fall 2010, this seminar invites faculty to learn ePortfolio construction in a hands-on environment, so that they can in turn utilize this educational tool to help students maximize their learning. Areas of emphasis include using ePortfolio to connect students with their faculty, peers, and external audiences more meaningfully; to overcome fragmentation in the curriculum; and to integrate students’ diverse learning experiences, both inside and outside of the classroom.
Assistant Dean Bret Eynon and Craig Kasprzak, LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning, Professor Thomas Onorato, Natural Sciences, and Professor Ellen Quish, Adult Learning Center

Core Competency Mini-Seminars
Through these three cross-disciplinary Mini-Seminars, faculty create and refine assignments that help students develop much needed skills and competencies. In the Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum Mini-Seminar, faculty explore the cognitive process and develop new classroom activities and assignments that help students develop higher order thinking, problem-solving, and reasoning abilities. The Oral Communication Across the Curriculum Mini-Seminar focuses on developing activities and assignments that address students’ oral communication difficulties and advance their proficiency. Similarly, in the Quantitative Literacy Across the Curriculum Mini-Seminar, faculty develop strategies to help students develop the quantitative literacy skills they need not only for their academic studies, but also to help them become informed and involved participants in society.
Professor Sreedevi Ande, Mathematics, Engineering and Computer Science, Professor John Chaffee, Humanities, Carolyn Henner Stanchina, and Ros Orgel, LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning, and Professor Patricia Sokolski, Humanities
Cultivating the Hybrid Learning Environment
Offering two interlocking components, Introduction to Hybrid Teaching and Mentoring in the Hybrid Classroom, this seminar provides opportunities for faculty to develop course plans and activities, explore new technologies for teaching and learning online, and learn from and with each other about the benefits and challenges of teaching in hybrid and online environments.
Josephine Corso, LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning, Professor Steve Ovadia, Library, and Professor Santo Trapani, Business and Technology

Designed for Learning 2.0
The recent explosion of Web 2.0 digital technologies offers new resources and challenges for educators. This seminar offers opportunities for faculty to explore new “social web” tools – technologies that draw inherently on collaboration, creativity, and active participation – to engage students, deepen their understanding of the disciplines, and develop the skills they need as learners and leaders.
Professor Ximena Gallardo, English, Professor Gary Richmond, Humanities, and Priscilla Stadler, LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning

ePortfolio and Assessment Mini-Grant Program
This initiative aims to advance the comprehensive integration of ePortfolio into curricula, and to advance the college-wide Periodic Program Review (PPR) process by offering departments and academic programs mini-grants in support of faculty development and needed curricula revision processes.
Dr. Mercedes del Rosario, Assistant Dean Bret Eynon, and Ros Orgel, LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning

Faculty Scholars Publication Workshop
This year-long faculty development seminar is designed to assist faculty in their scholarly writing and publication. It seeks to help faculty complete academic writing projects and place them in external, peer-reviewed publications.
Professor Nancy Berke, English, Dr. Michele Piso, LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning, and Angela Wu, Business and Technology

Making Connections
The Making Connections National Resource Center at LaGuardia Community College supports systematic exchange across higher education, engaging creative educators with issues of inquiry, reflection, and integrative learning. Working with educators from a wide range of colleges and universities, Making Connections offers workshops, seminars, conferences, consultations, campus visits, and sustained collaborations. This year the Center is coordinating two federally-funded projects:

• Connect to Learning: ePortfolio, Engagement and Student Success is a 3-year FIPSE-funded project coordinated by LaGuardia’s Making Connections National Resource Center in partnership with the Association for Authentic, Experiential, and Evidence-based Learning (AAEEBL). Dr. Randy Bass of Georgetown University and Dr. Helen Chen of Stanford University serve as the project’s senior research scholars. The Connect to Learning project works with a dynamic national network of 22 campuses – community colleges, private colleges and research universities – to collectively engage in a recursive knowledge-generation process. The project focuses ePortfolio on reflective pedagogy and student learning, correlating improvement on student success measures such as retention with more nuanced assessment of student work using the AAC&U’s nationally normed VALUE rubrics.
Funded through a 5-year Title V grant, the Making Transfer Connections: ePortfolio and Student Success across CUNY program works with two senior colleges (Lehman and Queens) and three community colleges (Bronx, LaGuardia, and Queensborough) in a partnership designed to facilitate transfer and ensure student progress toward the Bachelor’s degree. Under LaGuardia's leadership, the five CUNY colleges employ ePortfolio practice in strengthening three areas pivotal to transfer success: instruction, advisement, and assessment. Together, these interrelated efforts will address a central goal – building a comprehensive academic pathway toward the baccalaureate degree for Hispanic and other minority and low-income students.

Professor Clarence Chan, Health Sciences, Professor Max Rodriguez, Education and Language Acquisition, and Dr. Mercedes Del Rosario, Assistant Dean Bret Eynon, Carolyn Henner Stanchina, Jiyeon Lee, Dr. Judit Török, and Mikhail Valentin, LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning

New Faculty Colloquium
In this year-long orientation to teaching and learning at LaGuardia, new full-time faculty begin to adjust to a new educational setting. They learn from each other and from senior colleagues about LaGuardia students, and the various pedagogies found to be effective at LaGuardia, and consider some of their options for future growth and development as teaching faculty.

Professor Sreedevi Ande, Mathematics, Engineering, and Computer Science, Josephine Corso, LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning, and Professor Ana María Hernández, Education and Language Acquisition

Project Quantum Leap
Now in its fourth year, this seminar brings together faculty from mathematics and other disciplines to adapt the nationally recognized Project SENCER (Science Education for New Civic Engagements and Responsibilities) approach to teaching science and higher-level mathematics in “compelling contexts” in a new setting and to a new population: LaGuardia's high-risk urban community college students in basic skills mathematics classes. Mathematics faculty deepen their understanding of PQL pedagogies and create lessons using the themes of environment and global warming, public health, and business and finance.

Professors Prabha Betne, Gordon Crandall, Marina Dedlovskaya, Yasser Hassebo, Rudy Meangru, Frank Wang, Dong Wook Won, and Shenglan Yuan, Mathematics, Engineering, and Computer Science, Assistant Dean Bret Eynon, Ros Orgel, and Dr. Judit Török, LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning

Re-Thinking the Capstone Experience
Grounded in explorations of models and best practices in capstone education across the country, this seminar guides faculty through the processes of constructing, piloting, and re-visioning capstone courses in their respective disciplines at LaGuardia. Faculty participants consider critical questions including how to help students synthesize and reflect upon their classroom and extracurricular learning; how best to prepare them for transition to either a four-year college or the workplace; what role capstones play in institutional assessment
at LaGuardia; and how ePortfolio can help to scaffold capstone pedagogy. The designation of Capstone Fellow both recognizes exemplary work in a prior year’s Re-thinking the Capstone Experience seminar and signals faculty members’ commitment to further experimentation and course redesign at the capstone level.

Professor J. Elizabeth Clark, *English*, and Assistant Dean Bret Eynon and Craig Kasprzak, *LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning*

**Student Technology Mentors (STMs)**

Working in unique student-faculty partnerships that help faculty to design and use interactive technologies, STMs benefit from intensive training and support that prepare them for success in education and career.

Ali Abdallah and Josephine Corso, *LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning*

**Teaching the City: Rethinking the Urban Studies Seminar**

LaGuardia was one of the first community colleges in the nation with an Urban Studies requirement for all students. What does that mean for us now? What does it mean in different disciplines and majors? How do we teach our Urban Studies courses? What makes them “urban?” What can we do, across the college, to help students connect knowledge of the city with disciplinary skills and understandings? In this pilot seminar faculty consider these questions as they re-think and re-design Urban Studies courses.

Professor Kristen Gallagher, *English* and Ros Orgel, *LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning*

**The Art of Advising: Learning and Implementing Holistic Advising Skills**

This seminar goes beyond traditional definitions of “advising as course selection” to address holistic factors critical to successful academic advisement. Specifically, faculty members are exposed to topics including similarities between teaching and advising, the role of advising in student retention, advising from a multicultural perspective, the use of ePortfolio as an advising tool to promote successful transfer, and special advising needs for underprepared students and special populations.

Dr. Mitchell Levy and Laura McGowan, *Center for Counseling, Advising, and Academic Support* and Dr. Bernard Polnariev, *Accelerated Studies in Associated Program (ASAP)*

**Writing in the Disciplines (Affiliated Program)**

Part of a nation-wide interdisciplinary effort, the year-long Writing in the Disciplines seminar supports full- and part-time faculty as they develop and test writing-intensive assignments for integration into their courses. Seminars are facilitated by interdisciplinary teams of faculty and CUNY Writing Fellows.

Professors Marian Arkin, Phyllis van Slyck, and James Wilson, *English*
Call for Participation and Papers

In Transit Volume 6 and the Carnegie Seminar for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

The Performing Sciences

The next issue of In Transit will solicit papers on the scholarship of teaching and learning science in the two year college. In preparation for writing an article, interested science scholars are invited to participate in the Carnegie Seminar on the Scholarship for Teaching and Learning, which for the first time will run on a two-year cycle, from September 2011 to Spring 2013, that coincides with the 2013 publication of In Transit. This two-year process is designed to create time, place, and critical feedback for developing a scholarly paper in a supportive community of peers and faculty research mentors.

In the last years, the Obama administration has drawn attention to education in community colleges, with special emphasis on increasing opportunities for women and underrepresented populations. Addressing the national Academy of Sciences, President Obama launched “Educate to Innovate,” a nationwide effort to “help reach the administration’s goal of moving American students from the middle to the top of the pack in science and math achievement over the next decade.”

Recent conversations with CUNY science faculty at the senior colleges (SENCER/SoTL Conference, College of Staten Island, Spring 2010) about the challenges of teaching chemistry and biology suggest the need at LaGuardia to focus on questions of pedagogy related to the natural sciences. To share with the wider LaGuardia campus the forms of collaboration, experimentation, and the fundamental ways that scientists are educated, The Carnegie Seminar and In Transit, Volume 6 wish to concentrate on the skills necessary to “think like a scientist.” What are these skills, and how are they defined, taught and learned? At LaGuardia, in what ways do our science faculty communicate to students, in the words of Obama, “a sense of promise, a sense that with some hard work – with effort – they have the potential to achieve extraordinary things?”

Designed to support scholarly inquiry, the Carnegie Seminar therefore invites interested faculty to explore SoTL theory and method, examine teaching practices in the science classroom and laboratories, and design and implement a research project. The seminar goals are to provide participants with constructive feedback from peers on ideas, research design, data analysis, and paper drafts. We will also read foundational texts in the scholarship of teaching and learning, frame definitions of its practice, and discuss its value for our college and students.

For more information about dates, applications, and other enthusiastic inquiries, please email Michele Piso at the Center for Teaching and Learning mpiso@lagcc.cuny.edu