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## Academe needs structural change toward more equitable pedagogy (opinion)

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In November of 1975, the great writer, Black feminist theorist, and critical pedagogy advocate [Audre Lorde](#) <sup>[1]</sup> had a nightmare that many instructors will recognize: *"Dream -- a classroom -- am I the teacher or a student? I have not attended enough --either lost or late. Exam approaching -- how can it be a class -- how can I study or teach -- I haven't attended enough. Doom must come but will it?"* If even a legendary figure like Audre Lorde had anxiety dreams about entering a classroom, it's safe to say anyone can feel unprepared.

This is not surprising, really. Most of us *are* unprepared to teach. We were never taught how. We're mostly winging it. Even worse, most of us know, deep down, that many of the teaching practices we have inherited contribute to inequality. We see the disparate success rates of our students, year in and year out, and we don't know how to change. It is no wonder that so many of us -- even the great Audre Lorde -- have recurring anxiety nightmares around teaching.

This anxiety about effective teaching is a structural problem. Despite several hundred studies on the efficacy of engaged, participatory learning practices, most of our teaching continues to rely on hierarchical, talking-head lecture formats or, in discussion classes, what amounts to a "distributed lecture" where we ask students questions and the same few raise their hands. Most of us simply don't know how to take the pedagogical ideas from Lorde, bell hooks or Paulo Freire and turn them into new and better ways to teach.

At the City University of New York (CUNY), the largest public urban university in the nation, we're working collectively and collaboratively to address this problem. We are focusing on equitable, engaged, active learning strategies that are successful for students and for instructors. Together, we are developing solutions that we hope will work far beyond the half a million full and part-time students in our system of four-year and two-year campuses. What's most revolutionary is our insistence on focusing on student *and* faculty success together. We understand disrespect and bias toward students as coterminous with disrespect and bias toward faculty. Both are part of the same structural inequality baked into higher education.

Our goal is to confront these inequities. It is our conviction that higher education cannot increase student success without improving teaching methods. However, we cannot expect faculty members to transform their own teaching until we address the structural inequality of the current system of faculty rewards. Colleges and universities that want to improve student success need to institutionalize the value of good teaching *as much as* they value research.

Even though academics across the range of learning institutions spend an estimated 60 percent <sup>[2]</sup> of our weekly labors on teaching in the classroom, preparing for class, advising or grading, the reward structure of higher education places most weight, by far, on research productivity -- mainly on publications. Few graduate programs carefully or thoroughly prepare students for teaching college classes, and our methods of evaluating what constitute good teaching are mostly highly biased, flawed, end-of-term, anonymous student evaluations. <sup>[3]</sup> Most of us teach without much knowledge of the science of learning, and we basically replicate the lecture or raise-your-hand-style discussion methods that studies show are not only dated but also reinforce hierarchies of knowledge and power that tend to replicate race, gender, and class disparities.

As Audre Lorde knew, engaged learning breaks the cycle of inequality and is also the most effective way for anyone to learn any subject. Recently, several scientists published a "meta study" of more than 225 separate studies of learning in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences <sup>[4]</sup>. They

concluded that by any measure -- equity, efficiency, even test scores -- active, engaged, student-centered learning is unequivocally superior. They quipped that difference in results is so marked that, had this been a pharmaceutical study, traditional teaching would be taken off the market.

The results are no less dramatic in the humanities, the area on which our work at CUNY concentrates. Yet even if we want to retrain ourselves to use more effective and equitable teaching methods, we face obstacles. Typically, the opportunity for professional development as instructors comes only when we are deemed to be failing badly -- or when the pandemic required an emergency pivot to teaching online. Because of the standards that elevate research so far above teaching, it is difficult for anyone to justify spending time on pedagogy. This is a terrible system. It hurts our students and it gives us nightmares.

### **Making Biases Visible**

In our initiative, Transformative Learning in the Humanities, we are concentrating on research-inspired teaching and teaching-inflected research, with *faculty recognition and reward* built into each and every part of the program. Supported by CUNY and a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, we are working with our colleagues at each of CUNY's 18 undergraduate schools (11 senior colleges and seven community colleges), on an array of peer-to-peer learning methods and resource-sharing strategies that offer faculty members effective, research-based *and* time-saving methods that work in the classroom, both face-to-face and online.

The time saving part of this work is crucial. Going all the way back to Phillip W. Jackson's 1968 classic *Life in Classrooms*, sociologists of education have studied over-assigning as one part of the "hidden curriculum" of race and class inequality in higher education. Nearly half of all students today work more than 30 hours a week while attending college full time. Excessive out-of-class homework turns out to be an equity issue. Over-assigning work privileges an elite or middle-class student's cultural ability to "skim" and "fake it." As faculty add more books and articles to their syllabi, thinking that it adds rigor, rarely do they stop to consider whether those hefty assignments are equitable, realistic

or effective. And guess what? Heavy course assignments do not necessarily improve learning outcomes.

In parallel fashion, faculty at teaching-heavy institutions carry heavy workloads even as they are expected to sustain regular publication schedules based on the lighter responsibilities of peers at more elite universities, a system that again reproduces inequality.

Everything we are doing together in Transformative Learning in the Humanities seeks to make the biases embedded in traditional teaching practices visible. The single most important step any institution can take to improve teaching to help ensure student success is to support *faculty members'* success, recognizing faculty achievements and rewarding them with time or money for their contributions.

We are sharing strategies faculty members have developed for more equitable, empowered learning, *and* we are recognizing their contributions to teaching excellence as a crucially important form of research. For instance, rather than bring in outside experts to lecture CUNY faculty on innovative teaching -- typically, professors from institutions with more money and more prestige -- we offered CUNY faculty experts the opportunity to develop public programs to showcase their own effective and equitable teaching methods. We were able to offer them stipends for their extraordinary efforts above and beyond their normal workloads. During the past spring semester, <sup>[5]</sup> while CUNY and most of New York City was shut down due to the pandemic, over 100 faculty working with 80 students developed more than 70 publicly available programs attended by more than 2,000 registered webinar participants from colleges and universities all across CUNY, the nation, and the world.

Aware that pedagogical contributions are often invisible in higher education's hierarchical faculty reward system, we further recognized those efforts by sending letters to the chairs and provosts of the faculty leaders who organized and presented their scholarly teaching efforts. Such letters commending the individual faculty member for their contribution to public knowledge can become part of a personnel file, adding value to future hiring, reappointment, tenure and promotion decisions.

The letters are particularly important for an adjunct instructor, community college or "teaching institution" faculty member. We are particularly proud that, as part of our emphasis on faculty equity, we have been able to reserve 25 percent of our faculty fellowship positions for part-time, adjunct faculty who are all too often excluded from such programs.

This summer, we embarked on the second phase of our program. A board of faculty advisers selected 51 Andrew W. Mellon Faculty Fellows to participate in semester-long programs that focus on sharing teaching ideas, methods, research and resources. Mellon Faculty Fellows are all currently teaching while participating in this peer-to-peer faculty initiative and will be implementing creative, effective ideas in their classrooms, touching some 5,000 students.

Participating students will offer ongoing, constructive and creative feedback on new methods -- what works best for them, what does not -- and will be recognized as Student Scholars. We've been able to offer student participants in the program small scholarships supplemented with Metrocards. The impact of these teaching and learning collaborations will be tremendous: the faculty members and students involved are teaching, learning, and sharing public knowledge in every borough of New York City.

We know our work is part of a movement bigger than CUNY and that it has a rich history of teacher-scholar pioneers. In our one-day summer institute, we brought everyone together to share ideas, resources, methods, strategies and inspiration to build new ideas that can be incorporated into syllabi, even in the most rigid and prescriptive of departments. We were able to give each of the Mellon Faculty Fellows a small stack of inspiring and, we hope, unexpected books: Susan D. Blum's *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning and What to Do Instead*), Felicia Rose Chavez's *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom*, and Bruce Mau's *MC 24: Principles for Designing Massive Change in Your Life and Work*. And even more important, our core texts included monographs by Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, and June Jordan -- three great writers who were also educational radicals and pioneers who taught at CUNY in the 1970s and 1980s. These beautiful, fine-printed books include archival materials

discovered, edited and published by CUNY graduate students as part of the Lost & Found series [6]. They feature the syllabi, drafts, policy reports, class and writing notes, and other documents by these great writers and make all of us in this initiative aware that we are building on a tradition of those fighting for equal educational opportunity for everyone.

During the coming academic year, our Faculty Fellows will come together in smaller cohorts to refine and design their teaching practices for even more active, empowered learning. Their work will put into practice their collaborative ideas from our summer institute, while they will also seek feedback and engagement from their current students. In real time and across every undergraduate campus within CUNY, faculty and students will establish a rich set of their best practices for equitable student-centered teaching and learning. By the year's end, Faculty Fellows will publish their insights and their outcomes as free, openly accessible teaching resources. We imagine the public knowledge Faculty Fellows produce as another opportunity to amplify connections between teaching and research, even as it also centers on equity as critical to higher education.

Thanks to the Opportunity Insights Economic Tracker [7] developed by economist Raj Chetty and his team, we can confirm what we already knew: higher education does not convey social mobility equally. In the words of The New York Times columnist David Leonhardt, [8] "The City University of New York system propelled almost six times as many low-income students into the middle class and beyond as all eight Ivy League campuses, plus Duke University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford University and the University of Chicago, combined." This outcome is extraordinary. Our teaching faculty *is* the secret sauce. They are the experts -- often unsung -- on what works for our largely first-generation students. Faculty members at every rank, including non-tenure track and adjunct faculty, contribute to this achievement.

Our mission in Transformative Learning in the Humanities is to spend the next two years leading a movement for pedagogical change. We join with other institutions such as Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, and Worcester Polytechnic Institute that are carefully and creatively rethinking the

outdated reward systems for teaching, research, community engagement, diversity and equity. Our focus is CUNY but our ambition is to create models for equitable, effective teaching at *all* institutions, in all disciplines. Crucially, this means championing teachers. A more just future depends on it.

**Section:**

[Transforming Teaching & Learning](#) <sup>[9]</sup>

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**Links**

- [1] <https://cuny.manifoldapp.org/projects/audre-lorde-i-teach-myself-in-outline-cuny-1f>
- [2] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/04/09/research-shows-professors-work-long-hours-and-spend-much-day-meetings>
- [3] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/02/27/study-student-evaluations-teaching-are-deeply-flawed>
- [4] <https://www.pnas.org/content/111/23/8410>
- [5] <https://www.cuny.edu/academics/faculty-affairs/cuny-innovative-teaching-academy/transformative-learning-in-the-humanities/past-events/>
- [6] <https://www.centerforthehumanities.org/lost-and-found>
- [7] <https://opportunityinsights.org/>
- [8] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/opinion/sunday/americas-great-working-class-colleges.html>
- [9] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/news-sections/transforming-teaching-learning>