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Kate Joranson University of Pittsburgh

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Building a Pedagogy of Idea Generation and Embodied Inquiry

Kate Joranson *University of Pittsburgh*

My colleague Audrey and I are pushing carts full of library books out onto the lawn just outside the Frick Fine Arts building at the University of Pittsburgh. More than a few books slip off the cart as we navigate the sloping sidewalk and onto the grass. I haven't secured the books sufficiently because I'm rushing. It's the third week of fall term 2021, and I'm exhausted. We are here to make space for idea generation by dedicating time to browsing an expansive, deliberately chosen collection of physical books. The instructor and his students arrive and begin looking through the books, joining us under a beach umbrella I've stuck in the lawn to extend the shade of the building. It's hot. Just inside the building there is an auditorium overflowing with students, mostly wearing masks, listening to a lecture in the dark. We are fortunate to be working with a small class that can meet outside and enjoy the more-relaxed interactions that are possible in fresh air. Nevertheless, an underlying urgency and fatigue is palpable as we each move through our own mix of emotions and experiences. How does one find one's path and articulate questions in such a state?

As we browse together and share our findings, I aim to create a generative space that acknowledges the complexities of pandemic living and learning. The varied traumas we are experiencing make both in-person and online courses full of potential for both connection and disconnection. Fragmentation of this kind has always existed in the classroom, but is more visible during the pandemic. Pema Chödrön's writing helps us to imagine what it means to make connections with one another and to imagine what compassionate connection looks and feels like. She writes:

Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well

can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity. ¹

The compassionate darkness Chödrön describes is spacious; there is room for possibility. I am more able to engage my imagination in this darkness, build connections with and among students, and imagine different futures together. Deeply engaging one's imagination is a means of survival.² I hope that my students can find at least a bit of fertile ground to cultivate their own compassionate, liberating lines of inquiry.

What futures become possible when we center questions, inquiry, and affective responses in research processes? What does it mean to support encounters with new ideas, and how can we offer authentic, humanizing experiences? I am sitting with these questions as I work to build more compassion and curiosity into my work, especially in this (perhaps) late-stage pandemic, when students are navigating increasingly disconnected messages about their roles and futures. Engaging with students in this way is a practice that helps me to conceptualize myself as a thinker in relation to the power structures that inform my work. This practice creates space for me to learn from my students, be curious with them, and co-create humanizing spaces for idea generation.

Curated Browsing and Idea Generation

I developed this outdoor browsing experience indoors, before the pandemic. It grew out of conversations with faculty and students about how challenging it is to come up with ideas for papers and projects.³ This coming-up-with-an-idea part of creative and scholarly thinking can be mysterious, inaccessible, or rushed. What if we paused and stretched this part out, giving ourselves space and time to meander,

¹ Pema Chödrön, *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times*. Shambhala Library ed. (Boston: Shambhala, 2005) 66-67

² Tricia Hersey. *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto* (New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2022) 159, 174, 184-185, 190; bell hooks. *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (New York: Routledge) 61; Robin D. G. Kelley. *Freedom Dreams the Black Radical Imagination*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002) 2, 5-6, 196-8; Bettina Love. *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*. (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press., 2019) 11, 100-102.

³ Curated browsing is also key to other kinds of course work and thinking work, which I explore in the course I teach, "Curiosity and Critical Practice," a professional seminar for undergraduates majoring in art history and museum studies. In this course, I use curated browsing to help students develop "framing questions" that will guide their future work.

wonder, and share observations? In need of a name for this activity, I began calling it "curated browsing," to emphasize open-ended, indeterminate exploration of an intentionally selected set of materials. By shifting this often-solitary activity to a group experience, we build relationships around ideas, questions, and wonder together. Gretchen Bender reflects on how these methods work for her course, "World Art: Contact and Conflict⁴:"

Too often, courses compel students to focus in on a research topic or series of questions too quickly. We rarely give them the time and space to cast a wide net outward, to explore multiple trajectories, to fall into rabbit holes and get a bit lost as they meander. The curated browsing days accomplish this. But they provide this with a degree of security as we engage in this exploration together. The browsing events are that – events – that allow for quiet, congregant thinking time (thinking alone together).⁵

During these curated browsing sessions, both students and instructors have the opportunity to practice slowness⁶ as they encounter authors, artists, art objects, and ideas they may not have thought to search for, or even had language to search for. They find familiar concepts in new contexts and make connections among seemingly disparate topics. As we pass books back and forth, contextualizing them with our insights, delight, frustration, etc., we create a generative, sensory-rich space of exchange. The instructor for the course described at the beginning of this article, Kirk Savage, reflects on this slowness, "Collective curated browsing creates a break in routine, a space for the mind to relax and to expand simultaneously." We come to understand slowness not as a function of speed or pace, but of awareness and perception. This particular understanding of slowness helps describe the

⁴ Gretchen Bender describes this course in "Why World Art is Urgent Now: Rethinking the Introductory Survey in a Seminar Format" *Art History Pedagogy and Practice* 2, no. 2 (2017). https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ahpp/vol2/iss2/2/

⁵ Gretchen Bender, Correspondence, February 1, 2023.

⁶ Tishman, Shari, *Slow Looking: the Art and Practice of Learning through Observation.* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Isabelle Stengers and Stephen Muecke, *Another Science Is Possible: A Manifesto for Slow Science.* English edition. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018); John Miedema, *Slow Reading.* (Duluth: Litwin Books, 2019).

⁷ Kirk Savage, email to the author, March 7, 2023.

⁸ Bayo Akomolafe and Ayana Young. 2020. "Dr. Bayo Akomolafe on Slowing Down in Urgent Times" *For The Wild*. Episode 155, January 22, 2020. https://forthewild.world/listen/bayo-akomolafe-on-slowing-down-in-urgent-times-155

embodied experience of browsing that is an often overlooked part of research. Megan Prelinger reflects on this embodied work that allows for a connection between physical exploration of books and idea generation: "the process of research is inseparable from the physical process of exploration of the world. In my experience, creative and intellectual work flows from physical engagement with the landscape." As cofounder of the independent, experimental research library, the Prelinger Library, she developed an original, geospatial organizational system that "harmonizes with the process of exploration." Her system invites visitors to explore ideas in real space, with their bodies, and to consider research itself a creative practice.

Both the Prelinger Library and curated browsing experiences invite people to consider how the books came to be in front of them, in a collection. They suspect that decisions were made, and they often want to know by whom, how, and why. These discussions are a key moment where I share the vision that my colleagues and I developed as we gathered the books, refining and expanding our ideas as we worked. Our process is made up of a million small decisions, all of which are informed by power structures that we try to acknowledge and subvert. I use the word "curate" to describe this activity to emphasize these decisions, yet I know that I risk joining in the overuse of the word, which is now invoked to promote algorithmically selected clothing and wine. I choose to use the word "curate" in the sense that Hans Ulrich Obrist describes in an interview about his book, *Ways of Curating*:

I believe curiosity is why I am a curator. It is a desire to want to know and to connect what we know. Not only making connections but junctions as well. These lead us to one of my favorite definitions of curating, which comes from the English writer J. G. Ballard, who told me in our last conversation, just a few months before he died, "A curator is a junction-maker." He explained that on the few occasions he as a novelist curated exhibitions, he made junctions. The question is obviously, what are these junctions? ¹⁰

Obrist describes curating as an extension of curiosity, and a way of building both connections and junctions. Obrist sees connections as distinct from junctions. He is

⁹ Megan Prelinger and Rick Prelinger, "The Library as a Map: an interview with Rick Prelinger and Megan Shaw Prelinger." *Contents.* 2017. Issue 5 http://contentsmagazine.com/articles/the-library-as-a-map/

¹⁰ Lilia Ziamou, "Hans Ulrich Obrist: on 'Ways of Curating'" *Huff Post* (2016) https://www.huffpost.com/entry/hans-ulrich-obrist-on-way b 9203832

using the word connections to refer to the curatorial work of articulating links or relationships among objects, ideas, and people, whereas he sees junctions as points of contact among bodies traveling along their own trajectories. Junctions allow for meeting, which then creates the possibility of traveling together and/or changing direction. This conceptualization is useful when thinking about browsing curated collections of books, as it situates the notion of curating in a landscape of idea exchange. Kirk Savage reflects on these intersecting trajectories his students experienced:

No one makes discoveries or generates ideas in a vacuum. Our session on the lawn demonstrated in a tangible way that insights emerge from encounters with other humans and their own insights, whether on the page or in a more fleeting moment of connection.¹¹

Experiencing junction-moments, and then responding to them, is only possible when not knowing is ok. Vuk Vukovic, a graduate student who participated in the outdoor curated browsing said to me, "You asked us to not know stuff. You asked us to learn, to not to be specialists." He went on to describe his perception of the word "curate" in this context of curated browsing:

It means it was thought through. I wanted to experience it. Someone thought about how these books came together to make a multilayered scholarly experience. How do I enter a library space without feeling like an imposter? So overwhelming to look at everything. ¹³

Vukovic's reflection points to the importance of the volume of materials on encounters in these browsing experiences. The curated collection needs to be "capacious in scope and variety, yet still bounded and manageable." ¹⁴ My role as a librarian in this situation is bringing people and ideas together in a space where not-knowing is valued. By slowing down, exploring physical books in space, noticing the junction between our thoughts and the ideas of others, we open up potential for

¹¹ Kirk Savage, email to the author, March 7, 2023.

¹² Vuk Vukovic, Interview, March 29, 2022. Pittsburgh, PA.

¹³ Vukovic, 2022.

¹⁴ Gretchen Bender, email to the author, February 1, 2023.

idea generation. An in-person curated browsing session is structured like this, with infinite variations¹⁵:

- 1. We gather books on a variety of subjects that orbit the course or assignment topic, bringing together books that would not be typically on the shelf next to one another. This often involves librarians brainstorming keywords, falling down wonderful subject heading rabbit holes, using critical thinking to climb back out, chatting with the instructor as needed to shape the collection. Centering Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian-American and Pacific Islander, and all people of color in this process is crucial to assembling a collection that is anti-oppressive and critically engages imaginations.
- 2. We spread the curated browsing collection out on several tables (or on carts to haul outside.) We have tried different arrangements here, sometimes placing one book at each seat, and the rest piled in the middle of each table. As students arrive, I often invite them to get started browsing immediately.
- 3. I often begin browsing sessions with each of us spending time with one book. We then move around the room to tables filled with books, roaming, grazing, and browsing. Eventually, each student shares what resonated with them as part of a semi-structured conversation, always inviting and centering affective responses. I prompt them to share connections to other things they have read, discussed, encountered, from class or elsewhere. Some sessions are more free form, where there is no formal sharing time, and instead, the instructor and I cultivate side conversations with students while they browse, pausing occasionally to call the group's attention to an idea or observation. Regardless of the structure, I have found it is important to give students a supportive environment in which to turn inward, before inviting them to speak and share their observations.
- 4. These methods grew from my own practice as an artist and instructor, applying studio arts approaches and sensibilities. While this article focuses on art history courses, I have found they work well with other arts, humanities, and humanist-

¹⁵ While I do provide practical details and guidance in this section, discussing student outcomes, and the complex and varied relationships between library faculty and disciplinary faculty that drive this collaborative teaching are out of scope of this article. Should you want to explore these aspects of libraries, I recommend: Michelle Reale, *The Indispensible Academic Librarian*. (Chicago, ALA Editions, 2018); Maria Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction* (Sacramento, CA. Library Juice Press. 2013); Jason Coleman and Lis Pankl, "Rethinking the Neoliberal University: Critical Library Pedagogy in an Age of Transition." *Communications in Information literacy* (2020) 14, no. 1, 66–74.; Lyda Fontes McCartin and Rachel Dineen. *Toward a Critical-Inclusive Assessment Practice for Library Instruction*. (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2018).

leaning social sciences. I encourage students to use a range of strategies for engaging, moving nonlinearly through the books, taking in headings, images, dropping into a particular section to read, pausing as they like. I also encourage them to notice the materiality of the book, including its weight, the tactile qualities of the cover and pages, and how the book asks to be held, whether it lays flat, or whether it requires that we peer into it, gently prying it open. I encourage students to make notes, lists, drawings, and even tracings of what they find and what they notice as they browse. I invite them to write down the questions that pop into their head as they engage with the book. I offer pencils and a rich assortment of papers, including graph paper, tracing paper, post-its, index cards, thick drawing paper, all in a range of sizes and colors. That initial reach for the paper that appeals to them is an important moment. They are physically engaged, taking up more space as their upper body leans across the table, making an intuitive choice, claiming a desire in the library. There are many paths into this embodied approach; for me, I came to understand these embodied ways of knowing and growing through my experience as an art student, then later as a teacher, artist, mindfulness practitioner, and parent.

Co-creation and Agency

When we browse together, we co-create a generative space for ideas that is fundamentally relational. Sometimes students make recommendations to one another, such as "this reminds me of your work," or "is this sort of what you were getting at the other day?" I build the discussion with them, challenging them to fill up the space with their own observations. Likewise, I invite them to read, notice, and question alongside authors and artists. When we wonder and inquire alongside authors and artists, our minds are more prepared to notice connections, contradictions, and sensibilities among authors, artists, and one another. We build a stronger awareness of what it means to bring thinkers and ideas in proximity with one another, and what becomes possible when we articulate our own critical response. I choose to invite (rather than require, insist, or demand) to emphasize the value of their contributions as well as the generous reception I aim to create. They choose whether or how to participate, and I acknowledge that. The students are not receptacles to be filled, and I am not the content provider trying to fill them up. Likewise, I am not a resource to be mined. ¹⁶ Paolo Freire calls this the banking model of education, and describes the harm it causes by creating a structure where

¹⁶ Alison Langmead and Kate Joranson, "Notes from the Summer 2020 Co-Learning Encounters." *Co-Learning Encounters.* 2020 https://colearning.hcommons.org/2020/05/26/notes-summer-2020/

people must fit into the world rather than questioning and shaping the world.¹⁷ Inviting students to reflect, question, and shape ideas makes room for students to take up their own agency. They are more able to see themselves as thinkers with agency when we help them develop reflective, metacognitive skills.

In Felicia-Rose Chavez's Anti-Racist Writing Workshop, we learn how she builds students' metacognitive skills as well as a practice of mindful awareness of their thoughts, feelings, and sensations. She describes her students "Tuning inward—the revolutionary act of defying autopilot to more deeply communicate with ourselves..." She reshapes classroom power dynamics by supporting students and challenging them to notice patterns of whiteness and control:

Mindfulness does more than push students to break with old writing habits and unlock their creative power. It also helps achieve an anti-racist workshop agenda. White institutional customs of control and domination are ingrained in participants' psyches. To disrupt these habits, workshop participants must engage in ongoing self-awareness.¹⁹

Chavez creates a community of thinkers who disrupt educational norms by doing difficult inner work, drawing strength from one another in their shared practice. Making space for idea generation benefits from a similar structure, where we are in relationship with one another as well as with the authors and artists we encounter in the curated collection of books. bell hooks reflects on this mutual labor: "education can only be liberatory when everyone claims knowledge as a field in which we all labor." hooks helps us to imagine ourselves as moving through a landscape of ideas, deeply connected to one another and our environments while also as individuals with agency.

Uncertainty

Idea generation is a neat and tidy term for what can feel unwieldy, like tremendous uncertainty. When confronted with tables and carts full of books, some students

¹⁷ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 50th anniversary ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018) 76.

¹⁸ Felicia Rose Chavez, *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How To Decolonize the Creative Classroom.* (La Vergne: Haymarket Books, 2021) 61.

¹⁹ Chavez, 61.

²⁰ hooks, bell, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. (New York: Routledge, 1994) 14.

may feel overwhelmed. It is possible that not everyone will be in the right mindset to sink into this work. Some students may feel pressure to perform curiosity. This discomfort is worth exploring in conversation as a class, in a small group, or individually. These frustrations contain valuable information, and by reflecting on them, we can begin to articulate emerging thoughts. I have learned a tremendous amount when students express frustration; not only what it is like to be them, but how I might ask better questions of the instructors about classroom dynamics and project deadlines. I've learned how to gauge how much is too much or too little, while gaining insight into how they see themselves in relation to the production of knowledge and information systems. Making time for idea generation is worthwhile, even if a particular session may not feel as immediately fruitful. Such is life. By setting aside time for open-ended exploration, we signal that it is ok to seem 'unproductive,' a word worth wrestling with. Though idea generation is often productive, its *value* is not in its productivity.

While not every session ends with a productive, revealing moment, all of make creative and scholarly thinking more visible and accessible. Students get to see instructors encountering new ideas, and instructors benefit from a structure in which to share their own experiences with idea generation. Finishing a piece of work provides clarity but can also erase the messy process of getting to the end. When instructors engage deeply in these browsing sessions, I prompt them to share what it is like for them, as experienced artists and scholars, to encounter new ideas. They may talk through how they are making sense of the new materials or share how the materials relate to and reshape their previous understandings. When we allow ourselves to experience uncertainty alongside students, they are better able to sit with their own uncertainty, turning it into questions.

Artist Lynda Barry helps in imagining what it can feel like to sit with discomfort, especially in relation to the notion of being "inexperienced." She is particularly interested in the marks made by those not trained in drawing. In *Syllabus*, an extended reflection on images and creativity in comic form, she writes, "What if that is what a line looks like when someone is having an experience by hand? A live wire!" Barry invites us to notice the lines we make—appreciating them not in spite of, but because of their untrained qualities. She emphasizes the present moment, helping us to tune into our bodily experience of discomfort as we venture out of our comfort zone. In an interview with the Canadian Broadcasting Centre, she describes drawing as, "this feeling of being a little out of control; it's like being

²¹ Lynda Barry. *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor*. (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2014) 31.

on a sled..."²² These comparisons acknowledge discomfort and situate it alongside anticipation and exhilaration. Working with these thoughts and feelings is part of creating authentic, humanizing educational experiences and invites us to transform uncertainty and discomfort into a sense of future-oriented openness.

Imagination and Relation

Wondering with is a way of imagining one's own ideas in relationship to the ideas of others. Encouraging students to wonder alongside an author or artist helps them to relax their critique muscle, and instead exercise what Maxine Greene calls the "poetic imagination," where one imagines the author or artist's world, and "discovers how it looks and feels from the vantage point of the person whose world it is" and begins to "grasp it as a human possibility." By practicing this alongside one another, we have the opportunity to learn from one another's experiences and co-create a generative space shaped by imagination and dialogue. However, we must dig into how one's poetic imagination is still informed by dominant culture and white institutional control. adrienne marie brown describes how imaginations are not inherently benevolent:

Imagination turns Brown bombers into terrorists and white bombers into mentally ill victims. Imagination gives us borders, gives us superiority, gives us race as an indicator of capability. I often feel I am trapped inside someone else's imagination, and I must engage my own imagination in order to break free.²⁴

Imagination can re-inscribe violence and trauma, and brown reflects on how she must dig deep to imagine new worlds where "no one sees Black people as murderers or Brown people as terrorists or aliens, but all of us as potential cultural and economic innovators."²⁵ As a white woman, librarian, and instructor, I am learning from brown and Chavez as I try to situate imagination and idea generation within a critical, reflective practice, building awareness of how my own ideas about

²² Lynda Barry and Tom Powers. "Cartoonist Lynda Barry Teaches Us How to Silence Our Inner Critic and Draw Like a Child" Canadian Broadcasting Centre. 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CfmeTPOHLE&t=92s

²³ Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995) 4.

²⁴ adrienne maree brown. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. (Chico, CA: AK Press. 20171) 18.

²⁵ brown, 19.

this are informed by power structures. Facilitating idea generation through curated browsing prompts me to conceptualize myself as a thinker in relation to students, other instructors, as well as the authors and artists in curated collections of books. This practice provides me with space to wonder, with brown, "what are the ideas that will liberate all of us?"²⁶

Kevin Quashie describes how consciously being in relation with others creates abundance, and a sense of possibility:

Relation is not a dissolving into the other, but a capacity to become more and more through the relation. Relational being is like being a poem, a textuality that is itself and that also unfurls as more every moment.²⁷

Quashie invokes textual, poetic ways of being and thinking—inviting us to imagine humans as poems rather than as vessels. When we approach learning and being with this awareness, it becomes incredibly urgent to interrupt transactional models of learning and actively cultivate open-ended inquiry. When we invite students to wonder alongside one another, as well as with the authors and artists they are browsing, we make space for ideas to spread out, unfold, unfurl, and grow.

How one conceptualizes oneself is, in a sense, a story we tell about ourselves. Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, "the stories we choose to shape our behaviors have adaptive consequences." Each of these stories about how we came to understand our thoughts and those of others, has power to shape our future behavior. We need to learn to tell stories about ourselves that acknowledge and work with uncertainty — stories that help us conceptualize ourselves as thinkers — not stories where we overcome uncertainty, but where we move through it, with it, thinking and questioning in relation to one another.

Questions

What is all this open-ended idea generation and questioning for? How do I ensure this work doesn't turn into an intellectual game, and undermine itself? Is it worth making space for this work, hauling carts full of books outside in the heat? Is it

²⁶ brown, 19.

²⁷ Kevin Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021) 44.

²⁸ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants.* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2015) 30.

possible to do this work without instrumentalizing idea generation? How do my attempts to cultivate compassionate spaces end up perpetuating white institutional control? I return to Paolo Freire's assertion that reflection is nothing without action. They must operate together, as praxis, where reflection and action inform and guide one another.²⁹ I also look to bell hooks, who put love at the center of her theory and practice.³⁰ She had a regular practice of asking herself, "What are you doing, bell, for the creation of a beloved community?"³¹ Freire insists we must "experience the force of the question, experience the challenge it offers, experience curiosity, and demonstrate it to the students."³² Reflecting together helps us find language to imagine and describe the force of our questions. We sit with an awareness of our precarity, and find respite in the compassionate, shared darkness that Pema Chödrön describes. Will we "be able to stand not knowing long enough to let something alive take shape"?³³

²⁹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 50th anniversary ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018) 87.

³⁰ bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions*. (New York: William Morrow and Compay, Inc. 2000)

³¹ "bell hooks: Buddhism, the Beats, and Loving Blackness, a dialogue between bell hooks and George Yancy," *New York Times*, 10 December 2015.

³² Paulo Freire and Antonio Faundez, *Learning to Question: a Pedagogy of Liberation*. (New York: Continuum, 1989) 37.

³³ Barry, Lynda, *What It Is: Dramatically Illustrated with More Than Color Pictures*. (Montréal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2012) 135.