

# Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

---

Volume 1  
Issue 12 *Spring 2014*

Article 1

---

May 2014

## Introduction: Toward a Theory of Academic Self-Awareness

Joshua Bucheister  
*Haverford College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe>



Part of the [Higher Education and Teaching Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Bucheister, Joshua "Introduction: Toward a Theory of Academic Self-Awareness," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 12 (2014), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss12/1>

## INTRODUCTION: TOWARD A THEORY OF ACADEMIC SELF-AWARENESS

*Joshua Bucheister, Haverford College, Class of 2014*

This special issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education* explores the possibilities of ‘academic self-awareness’: how we feel, choose, and act when we deliberately take in, take ownership of, and re-circulate knowledge in and beyond the college classroom. Our goal is to shed light on the pressures that accompany the learning process—pressures that are too often acted out, ignored, or overcome, but, when articulated and lingered with, can themselves become material for self-analysis. The collection of essays included in this special issue present both a larger frame for the work of academic self-awareness—penned by Dan Weiss, the President of Haverford College—and glimpses into individual teacher and student experiences provided by a faculty member and two undergraduates. These glimpses illuminate how the pressures that accompany the learning process can be detrimental or generative and, how, specifically, they can hinder or contribute to teaching and learning together in higher education.

Haverford College constitutes a unique context for the experience and analysis of academic self-awareness. With its roots in Quaker tradition, Haverford strives for a consensus model of decision making. Faculty, staff, and administrators who spend many years in the College community experience this decision making in multiple forums and over an extended period of time. Students, however, who are generally members of the residential community for only four years, have a more focused experience of this consensus model. Each semester, for instance, the student body joins together in a plenary-style meeting to revise the Honor Code, the College’s rule book for academic and social proceedings. At these and other meetings, statements are followed by moments of silence, where participants—whether they agree or disagree with what has been said—give the speaker the respect her contribution deserves. This commitment to consensus challenges community members to constantly redraw the crucial, though crucially malleable, line between their academic and personal lives. Rituals like Plenary ask them to treat social situations with the responsibility that they would a classroom discussion. Conversely, Haverford’s focus on intellectual exchanges amongst professors and students asks them to engage the classroom with the passion that they would close friends. As community members know all too well, this type of work requires patience, flexibility, and well-placed humility.

Like the Honor Code, the essays collected here are exercises in lingering on, inhabiting and, at points, loving those classroom questions for which there are no clear-cut answers. Like the Code, these pieces imagine education as a living, breathing ‘document.’ They mobilize experiences in order to reflect on how we are shaped by, as well as how we continually shape, our academic environment. They refuse to treat classroom experiences as either inherently positive or negative but cast them, rather, as always worthy of respect and careful analysis. And like the Code, they are moments of teaching and learning from one another: teaching the ‘secret history of awkward silences;’ learning from disagreement; and making communities where they are least expected.

In this introduction, I briefly identify the focus of each essay that is included and then offer my own story of academic self-awareness.

In “Leadership Through Consensus: Reflections on My First Year at Haverford,” Dan Weiss, President of Haverford College, argues for a notion of and practice of leadership that is collaborative—a project undertaken as a form of partnership with those in the academic community. Shared knowledge construction in the classroom and shared governance in the College provide administrators, faculty, staff, and students the opportunity to conceptualize and pursue shared objectives, to work together toward the experiences and the future they value and want to see. Weiss’ self-awareness manifests in his re-affirmation and enactment of the College’s historic commitment to consensus—a necessarily slow and deliberate process—in a time of high pressures and the expectation of rapid response.

In “Blank Slates and Intellectual Self-Confidence,” Devin Van Dyke, Haverford College, Class of 2014, argues against the concept of students as blank slates and asserts the importance of students’ personal as well as academic development during the crucial college years. He warns against the “loss of faith in the self, which in time hardens into passivity” if students are not invited to bring their experiences and perspectives to bear on their studies. With both insight and passion, Van Dyke calls for students and faculty alike to value students’ background knowledge and experience, to create and enter into a form of teaching and learning together that nurtures the development of the whole student.

In “The Secret History of Awkward Silences,” Alice Boone, a Lecturer at UCLA and former Visiting Assistant Professor of English at Haverford College, articulates an experimental practice of classroom engagement. While teaching a class on the ‘Secret History’ in 18th Century British Literature, Boone noted her students’ frustration with the long-winded and historically alien reading assignments. Rather than ask her students to overcome their frustration, however, she challenged them to “close read” the forces that inhibited their ability to understand the texts. In this quirky and sincere account, Boone argues for an experimental classroom practice where students and professors treat awkwardness with the respect (or frivolity, or frustration) that they would the assigned reading. As such, we make visible the complexity of the text at hand, as well as the improvisatory and always-already-mediated nature of knowledge more broadly. We learn to treat textual flaws—and our own flaws—with generosity.

In “Havin’ it Your Way,” Arman Terzian, Haverford College, Class of 2014, shares some of his thoughts on the writing process. During his junior year, Terzian writes, he felt stuck. Though he had previously believed in a one-to-one relationship between the time one spends working and a final grade, by junior year this model seemed to work no longer. Yet after confiding in some classmates and testing out the advice his friends had given him on future assignments, he discovered that there might be no such thing as an ideal paper. He learned that working hard does not always equal working smart. College writing (or any writing), he argues, aims for a balance between confidence in one’s own abilities and the confidence to ask for help.

Though each contributor was initially given the same set of prompts, what I find most delightful about the essays is their variety. Where some essays reflect on an entire year’s worth of experience, others land on a single moment. Where some weave personal anecdotes with literary and critical texts, others are less explicitly intertextual. Some write with light-heartedness, and others with concern.

Despite these differences, these essays speak with each other in several ways. Each essay maps mutually generative relationships between students, faculty, and staff. As Dan learns from Haverford's Quaker roots in order to lead the College through challenging times (and the Haverford community learns from Dan), Arman uses his peers' writing advice in order to share his own views back to them in direct prose. As Alice crowd-sources the prompts for her class's final assignment, Devin's professor's advice inspires him to assert a critique of the educational system—even, or especially, when it is advice that he finds problematic.

When I read through these pieces (and think about how frighteningly different they are from the essays I had expected), I realize that the line between “student” and “teacher” is more porous than I had once imagined. Perhaps, then, we can recalibrate designations like “student” and “teacher.” No longer inherent identity-markers, these labels morph into “active constructs” that we inhabit and slide between. They are useful insofar as they remain subject to revision. And for these four authors, education as revision requires some uncertainty. Devin asks for assignments tailored to individual students' knowledge base. Dan's ideal discussion emphasizes questions rather than answers. Alice invites students to theorize texts that they might not have even read. As such, the classroom becomes a site of contending significance—a space in which we are always, if implicitly, writing on top of each other.

I conclude this introduction with my own story of coming to academic self-awareness. I trace the development of my interest in the concept and my movement, with peers and professors, toward comfort with discomfort.

### *Toward My Own Academic Self-Awareness*

My interest in ‘academic self-awareness’ began last year in Junior Seminar with Professor Laura McGrane of Haverford College's English Department. In this full-year sweep of lyric poetry, the novel, and literary theory, students familiarize themselves with both the British canon and the 20th century critical debates that frame these works. As Professor McGrane repeatedly told us, the goal of Sem, as its inductees lovingly refer to it, is introduce students to various traditions in literary analysis such that they can become the next generation of readers, writers, and thinkers in their own right. [1]

Nearing the end of Sem, Professor McGrane began to complement normal class time with a series of ‘meta-conversations’ for a project on ‘threshold concepts’ [2] that she herself was participating in for the Spring-2013 issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*[3]. She asked us to comment on our out-of-class preparation: What do we *do* when we read for class? What happens when we just can't “get” the reading? How does an essay prompt become an 8-10 page paper that displays confidence and invites critique? Though it was some time before we could speak freely with one another—we were still learning how to balance the egalitarian ideal of a liberal arts college with the power relations implicit in any institution of higher education—these silences soon spilled into confessions on the various pressures at work in the learning process. What, we asked, does it mean to come to class feeling like we are less prepared than our peers when we work just as hard as they do? Why does it seem as if we need to reinvent the wheel every time we begin a paper? How does it feel to use jargon that can never

feel anything but foreign, feigned, artificial? We were college juniors. Papers should have been routine by then.

And then something odd happened. Talking about and, admittedly, performing our frustration, we realized that our affective responses were not unique. Rather, they were shared amongst undergraduates and tenured professors. After making these connections, class time got a lot more enjoyable. Every Tuesday and Thursday from 10 to 11:30 a.m., twelve different bodies that originally had no other reason to be there than circumstance become a community based not on overcoming, but inhabiting the awkwardness that is a college experience.

A similar phenomenon occurred in Professor Alice Boone's 'Reading Jane Austen,' a class that explored the popular reception history of Austen's oeuvre. [4] In this class, which was very theory-heavy, students would invoke the 'real Jane Austen—the Austen they had known as children—as a space able to resist theoretical and, in their eyes, artificial, scrutiny. Responding to the frustration that a gesture toward a sublime 'realness' can incite, Professor Boone asked students to write essays on what their 'real' Jane Austen entails.

That each student came up with different definitions for their 'real' Austen, however, led them to suggest that their desire for an authentic Austen—the idea that an author can put herself into the characters of her novel—is itself a theory. It's just one that feels more natural to us. It has been naturalized through repetition. It was just as artificial as the literary theory that they had originally tried to resist. None of which makes their desire for authenticity, and the continued failure to get at it, is any less a part of their reality. Perhaps, they mused, there is not such a distance between being natural and artificial, faking it and making it. What can artificiality enable when recognized not as the *bug* of undergraduate learning, but its ultimate *feature*? [5]

The shared discomfort of Sem, the real Jane Austen, and the unexpected communities of teachers and learners that grew out of these moments. Indeed, these moments made me wonder whether discomfort is not the exception to the rule of academic self-awareness, but rather that discomfort is the condition for academic growth. [6]

The condition for academic growth—and personal life. I didn't like college when I first arrived. I don't know whether Haverford was itself to blame, or if college forced me to make visible the less time-specific anxieties that 18 years of life with my parents had allowed me to cover up. Perhaps both interpretations were at stake. Either way, freshman year was hard. I felt dumber than my peers. I had trouble making friends. I couldn't wait for Winter Break, even as I dreaded answering the inevitable "How's college?"

And then I found novels. As Nick Carraway uncovered the lies and mistranslations on which the man who he once lauded as *The Great Gatsby* is built, I explored the feelings that we miss out on by living college for the 'best years of our life.' With Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, I asked whether the idea of happiness does its own type of violence. In this novel, Merry Levov, the spectacular (though eerily normal) daughter of the perfect Seymour "The Swede" Levov, commits an act of political terrorism that kills two innocent bystanders in rural New Jersey. For the eeriest thing about this novel is that by its concluding line—what on Earth is less reprehensible than the life of the Levov's?—I can't tell whether Merry's crime is a response to

either the Vietnam War (that's what we're told), or a father who just can't make sense of his irrational daughter. [7] These novels taught me to put my happiness in context. I wasn't the only one.

But if novels decentered the myth of happiness, they also taught me how to make do. Rita Dove puts it a little more eloquently:

*We were dancing—it must have  
been a foxtrot or a waltz,  
something romantic but  
requiring restraint,  
rise and fall, precise  
execution as we moved  
into the next song without stopping, two chests heaving  
above a seven-league  
stride—such perfect agony,  
one learns to smile through,  
ecstatic mimicry  
being the sine qua non  
of American Smooth.*

A poem that questions the physical and mental demands placed on a dancer, “American Smooth” is both sinister and emancipatory. [8] We do not know what agonies Dove’s “I” learns to smile through. The seven-league stride, as well as other bodily contortions that make up a dance? The way dance requires its actors to make the pain of dancing look smile-worthy, ecstatic? The way dance demands its participants (are they lovers?) to restrain the more romantic feelings that might surface? As American Smooth most visibly refers to a type of ballroom dances—but it certainly doesn’t need to—perhaps the speaker’s agony also references the historical demands placed on certain bodies that a reference to either America or physical labor might bring back. Rita Dove is an African American woman. I wonder why the speaker transitions from the story-like “we were dancing” to the more impersonal “two chests heaving /above a seven league stride.” Here, dance begins to remind us of other historical moments during which the bodies of marginalized others are forced to perform in certain ways, straddle oceanic lengths. The “league” is a nautical measurement.

Yet ecstasy is an out-of-body experience. Smiling through, the speaker remains distant from the dance, covering up physical discomfort with more pleasant memories. The abstract “one” stages a sort of mental abstraction, the particularly secular, particularly American distinction between mind and body. [9] Here, the speaker becomes a universal subject that at first recognizes (in lines 1 through 9), but then smooths over or sees through unfortunate bodily discomfort and differences.

But to what end? For Dove abstraction is equal parts violent. What’s to say that the mimicking refers not only to repeated dance moves, but also the repeated act of smiling through? What’s to say mental abstraction isn’t as institutionalized as is the uncomfortable seven-league stride? And indeed, that ecstatic mimicry, which can now refer to both physical repetition and the repeated act of smiling through, is the necessary make-up, the *sine qua non* of American Smooth, then maybe there is not such a distance between the physical and mental acts that constitute American Smooth. Perhaps they are but shadows of each other, derivatives of some totalizing system that constitutes bodies in certain molds (requiring restraint), rips them apart, offers the *idea* of mental departure, but ignores or smooths over those that just don’t feel like smiling through. Is this still a dance, or is it just social life itself?

I’ll stop. But only because I’m running out of space. Dove’s poem teaches me patience. I have to live with the fact that the poem might not, and might not need to add up. I’m not even sure that the dance occurred in the first place. I’ve never asked Rita Dove. And who’s to say that the real Rita Dove is at all similar to the Rita Dove that “American Smooth” speaks into being—the Rita Dove that I then use to arrange this poem’s discordant details? [10] All I have are words, the way these lines make meaning. But perhaps that’s all I need. Because it didn’t happen, “American Smooth” allows its readers to question the pressures that make up a single gesture, in a space whose stakes are not as explicitly high as is the real world.

And that’s where the magic happens. I get to treat life too as if it is a series of narratives that needn’t necessarily add up. One learns to smile through. I am able to find some distance between myself and the idea that college needs to be the best years of my life. That college has not been the ‘best years of my life’—that I don’t even know what a ‘best year of my life’ would even entail—is not so bad after all. Like the ‘real Jane Austen,’ it’s a narrative that we’ve naturalized through repetition. I get to read it alongside other, pleasanter memories. I don’t need to read it as any more real than the lines of Dove’s poem. Not any more ‘real’ than staying in on a Saturday night to do the reading assigned for class next week. It’s not because I’m behind on my work. Going out is just nerve-racking for me. I get to treat my obsessions (see: anyone who has ever met me) as narratives too. I get to inhabit them, love them. I refuse to read them as either inherently positive or negative, but cast them, rather, as always worth of respect and analysis. I learn to be patient with myself.

But like Dove’s speaker, I too have to wonder whether my own method of distancing, of smiling through, is itself a theory that just seems natural at this point. For there might be a major difference between the novels I read and the life I try to close read. If novels’ conclusions more often than not teach me that there is no such thing as a conclusion, then why does this conclusion—my college graduation—seem more real than others?

As you can tell, I'm still working through these questions. But for the time being, I'd like to thank my friends and family—both explicit and implicit—for their wisdom, love, and patience.

## Notes

[1] I borrow my description of Junior Seminar from a conversation had with Laura McGrane on January 24th, 2014.

[2] Jan Meyer and Ray Land, “Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge: Linkages to Ways of Thinking and Practicing within the Disciplines,” *Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses* Occasional Report 4 (May 2003), 1-12.

[3] Laura McGrane, “Topographies of Knowing in 299b: Junior Seminar,” *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education* Issue 9 (Spring 2013), <http://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss9/2/>

[4] I'll note up-front that I did not personally take ‘Reading Jane Austen.’ The information gathered here is a product of e-mail conversations, essay prompts (with Alice Boone’s permission on 7/19/2013), and word-of-mouth.

[5] I thank Alice Boone for introducing me to the language of, as well as the points of parity between “bugs” and “features.”

[6] I borrow the sentiment of this claim from John Lardas Modern’s *Secularism in Antebellum America*, whose prologue asks whether *Moby Dick*’s “language of steam and electricity ... suggest that that a state of enchantment is not the exception that proves the rule of an Enlightened, civilized evolution of human being but rather that enchantment itself is the rule.” John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America: With References to Ghosts, Protestant Subcultures, Machines and their Metaphors, Featuring Discussions of Mass Media, Moby Dick, Spirituality, Phrenology, Anthropology, Sing Sing State Penitentiary, and Sex with the new Motive Power* (New York and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xvi.

[7] Philip Roth, *American Pastoral*, First Vintage International Edition (New York: Random House, 2007), 423.

[8] My thanks to both Professor Lindsay Reckson and the members of ENG302: “Poetics of Ecstasy” for introducing me to Rita Dove’s work.

[9] Eva Cherniavsky, “Body,” from *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, ed. by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007), 26-29.

[10] Michel Foucault, “What’s an Author,” from *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 101-120.