

Learning

Kate Briggs and Sunil Manghani

With regard to his teaching at the Collège de France, by all accounts, Roland Barthes was very prepared. Comparing the published lecture notes with the transcribed and more recently published (though not yet translated) audio recordings of *The Preparation of the Novel* show how comprehensively drafted, or scored, his lectures were.¹ The spoken lectures do, in places, significantly expand on points that are only briefly, or elliptically, announced in the notes. The first course, *How to Live Together*,² deliberately builds in space and time for improvised responses to auditors' letters, comments and questions. But, for the most part, Barthes seems to have read aloud from notes with the working status of a script.

Drafting ahead of time is one way to prepare for the public delivery of a lecture. But surely every situation of teaching and learning requires a form – indeed, many different and sometimes competing forms – of preparation? Considerations may range from how the space is organized to the materials provided, from the duration of the session to differing demands made on people's attention. For the person assuming the role of lecturer/teacher/tutor (bearing in mind that teaching is itself always a form and an occasion for learning), there is the question of how to best prepare oneself for an encounter with a student or group of students, their ideas, their sensibilities and their work.

Simultaneously, if not prior to which, it is important to consider how best to prepare students for that same encounter; with the institution, with each other, with their own plans and projects, with themselves. For the person assuming the role of learner, there is equally the important matter of how best to prepare for the *scene of learning*. These questions are a co-mixture of the material, the bodily, the social and the philosophical: What to wear when addressing a new group of people? What materials to bring? How to pay attention? How to express oneself in this context? How to give and receive instruction, or new ideas?

In various ways and in differing teaching and learning situations, we have each sought to read and activate Barthes's work when thinking

through these sorts of questions. What follows are two different teaching aids (or provocations). While developed separately, both share a desire for practical efforts to engage affirmatively with the ‘scene of learning’; at the very least, to make critical questions appear in (rather than be excluded from) our spaces of teaching and learning. The first is a primer for the seminar space, to be shared and ‘owned’ with all involved, i.e., to act as a statement of intent, to be deliberated upon at the start of course. The second is the short description of (and two examples from) an ongoing project titled ‘Rituals in Preparation for Talking about Someone Else’s Artwork’. In different ways, they draw attention to the nuances involved when engaging with others in the live moments of learning, while also providing practical ideas for resetting an ethics of exchange.³

1. How to Learn Together

In his lecture course, *How to Live Together*, Barthes introduces the term ‘idiorrhymy’ to refer to the idiosyncratic rhythms of people, so as to ask how we can live *together*. He offers a vivid example of the problem: through his window he witnesses a parent walking quickly, pushing an empty stroller, while holding the hand of their child who is some steps behind. The parent ‘walks at [their] own pace, imperturbably; the child, meanwhile, is being pulled, dragged along, is forced to keep running, like an animal’. This vignette reveals for Barthes ‘the subtlety of power [...] effected through disrhythmy, heterorhythmy’.⁴ More positively he refers to various monastic living arrangements. What interests him is not a strict form of solitude and living apart, but *ways of giving space to one another*.

His lecture course was presented in a large auditorium, to an audience that would far exceed the optimum number for an idiorrhymic group (he writes: ‘I personally think the optimal number should be under ten – under eight even!’⁵). Nonetheless, regardless of scale and numbers, the underlying concern is with how, as groups and as individuals, we negotiate distance and proximities, or what Barthes refers to as the ‘gift of space’:

In the most tightly knit, least individualized animal groups (schools of fish, flocks of birds), and even in what appear to be the most gregarious species, there’s always an attempt to regulate

interindividual distance: it's the critical distance. This would probably be the most significant problem of Living-Together: how to identify and regulate the critical distance [. . .] A problem that's all the more acute today (in the industrialized world of a so-called consumer society): what's most precious, our ultimate possession is space.⁶

The context of *learning* presents a uniquely subtle set of proximities, which similarly can be thought of in terms of rhythms and idiorrhythmies. Like the school of fish that swims effortlessly as one (yet gives just enough space to each and every one within the whole, through every twist and turn), the hope is that learning can be idiorrhythmic: pursued together, yet within one's own space and pace. In coming together as a 'class' (in the sense of a lesson): it is important to join together in an open exchange of ideas and interests – i.e., that we each feel a 'space' where we can relax and where it is completely normal to *not* know things, and so to feel able to ask questions, to share ideas, to *open up* thoughts and lines of enquiry. In short: *to learn together*.

Three Spaces: In his essay 'To the Seminar', Roland Barthes identifies three spaces of the seminar: the institutional, the transferential, and the textual.⁷ Of these three spaces: none is judged, none prevails over the other.

Institutional. The frequency of classes, the schedule, and the site(s) of learning are all determined at an institutional level. But does this then compel us to recognise a hierarchy? Certainly not. The seminar, or any site of learning, is not a 'community of science' (i.e., a calculable set of knowledge) but a community in the sense of *being together*, in this case to express an interest, a desire, in a chosen subject.⁸

Transferential. Typically, the transferential relation is 'established between the director (of the seminar) and its members', yet this relation is never certain. 'I do not say what I know, I set forth what I am doing'. The teacher's role (if there is one) 'is to clear the stage on which horizontal transferences will be established: what matters, in such a seminar (the site of its success), is not the relation of the members to the director but the relation of the members to each other. [...] [T]he famous "teaching relation" is not the relation of teacher to taught, but the relation of those taught to each other'.⁹

Textual. It is often the case that the seminar leads to the production of writing; it assumes a form of practice (as in the repetition of a technique to make for an improvement), leading to the production of a text (e.g., the essay). But ‘textual’ here means more than that – it refers to ‘the rarest text, one which does not appear in writing. A certain way of being together can fulfil the inscription of significance: [...] there are texts which are not products but practices; it might even be that the “glorious” text will someday be a pure practice’.¹⁰

Disappointment. Given the ‘practices’ of the seminar, as a ‘space’ for testing, experimenting, and which should never be a site of an all-encompassing, fully comprehensive, authoritative form of knowledge (it is not a site for a transaction of knowledge, but its many transferences), it is inevitable there will be disappointments! If the teacher/manager/commentator appears not to have explained something, the temptation is for an aggressive form of disappointment: “X ... has *not even* told us, explained, shown ... gratified us”. When disappointment is generalized, there is a *chaos* in the gathering’.¹¹ Yet, disappointment can be taken as an incident of *difference*. A moment worthy of reflection, interjection, or even just the time to ask a ‘simple’ question; to enquire after what is perceived to be missing. ‘The space of the seminar has its rules (a game always does) but is not regulated; no one in it is the “foreman” of the others, no one is there to supervise, keep accounts, amass’.¹²

2. Rituals in Preparation for Talking About Someone Else’s Artwork

The starting point for this project was a group discussion about the occasions, forms and formats that are provided for talking about art works and artmaking within an art school. This took place at the Glasgow School of Art in November 2022. It was instructive to compare and contrast our experiences of different protocols and conventions. Why does a studio visit on the Masters in Fine Art at the Piet Zwart Institute last one hour and fifteen minutes? What happens in those last fifteen minutes? Why, in the Piet Zwart version of the group critique, does the artist not speak? When and by whom was that decided? These local questions led to more general ones: What are the provenances of the ways the group crit., the studio visit,

the one-to-one tutorial get choreographed and run? What does it mean for a student to be assessed on their contribution to a conversation within an institutional/educational setting? Who is enabled to converse ‘well’ under these circumstances – and in what language(s)? What does it take (what forms of social, linguistic and cultural fluency might it require) to have the courage or to feel entitled or enabled to interrupt, redirect the conversation, and ‘jump in’? Out of this conversation grew a project titled ‘Rituals in Preparation for Talking About Someone Else’s Artwork’, co-developed with Glasgow-based artists Naomi Garriock and James Epps. Its purpose was not to undermine how conversation currently happens within the institution but to open up the field of inquiry: What do we (or can we or could we) expect from these institutional conversations? How do we currently prepare for them? What different values and behaviours could we bring to them? The initial idea was to invent new forms of preparation. We called these ‘rituals’. But it soon became clear that true rituals don’t get invented. They get remembered, passed down or along, rephrased, re-cited, reactivated, translated. Working together, Naomi Garriock and Andy Murray designed a visual format for the short writings we gathered under this heading. This is forthcoming as an insert in *A Social Process of Unknowing Yourself in Real Time: Work on Conversation*, co-edited by Kate Briggs and Laura Haynes.¹³ The plan now is to continue this work: to collectively gather, test out and reflect on small forms of preparation and their implications. The project is envisioned as open-source and open-ended.

Setting Aside

A Ritual Proposed by Kate Briggs

This ritual stems from an observation: how many times I would bring my own concerns, anxieties and questions about my own work-in-progress to a conversation about someone else’s work (or observe a colleague doing so). How not to view someone else’s preoccupations and intentions, their successes and failures, through the lens of one’s own urgencies and hang-ups? As a pedagogue, setting these things aside should be straightforward – all part of making space and time for the encounter with someone else, their interests, their doubts. But being human, somehow, it isn’t (always so straightforward). Hence the following form of preparation:

Before entering of the space of the artwork (before viewing or reading someone's work in progress), note down the three most pressing ambitions you have for your own practice.

Now write down the deepest worries and concerns you are harbouring, currently, about your own work.

Be completely honest – in any case, these notes are only for yourself.

Put this list on your pocket or your bag. If you have made notes on your laptop or phone, close your device.

Take a silent vow not to refer to anything on this list in your discussion. Not to use it, however indirectly, as a starting point for the questions you might ask or the comments you might make about someone else's artwork. (Not today).

A Short Crossing

A Ritual Proposed by Sunil Manghani

Whether the pen is poised to return feedback on an essay, or an utterance is made at a PhD viva, or simply a dialogue is struck-up as a student is completing a classroom exercise, in any of these situations and many more besides, there is invariably the whole burden of *what else* might get said. All those things you know (or think you know); all the points of connections you feel obliged or enthused to articulate. *What else* you might say is too often what cuts across the very thing that can make a connection, that can be meaningfully received.

In these moments, I like to think (but I must admit it is never easy) that I can find it in me to 'take it to the bridge'.

In music, the bridge is a contrasting section of a song, which serves as a 'departure' – it creates a sense of movement and anticipation for when the song finally resolves back to its

regular pattern. The bridge is an interstice, a meeting and/or reflection, which in the best cases allows us to *listen again* (as we return to an otherwise predictable chorus and verse).

However, I like to think of this bridge in a literal sense. At a former university, my morning commute would involve walking over a bridge, a deep river running beneath. Invariably, in my bag would be the lecture notes I was due to deliver, which typically (as a young lecturer) I had agonised over the night before. The fear was *both* of under- and over-preparation. The perils of being underprepared is all too obvious, of course. Yet, equally, I increasingly became aware of the dangers of being over-prepared. Lectures can end up being robotic and overly dense. In a genuine desire to impart all the ‘wonderful’ knowledge you think will be of interest (all the myriad connections born of hours of solitary reading), the result can be a ‘one way street’.

But I came to think of the bridge I crossed in the morning as a lucky charm. There was something about that short walk from one bank of the river to the other – that liminal crossing – that calmed me and let me lift my head up out of the angst of all the preparation and anticipation the night before. So often along that bridge I would have a thought, an image perhaps, a joke, a ‘way in’ to the whole lecture that somehow brought all that was abstract back to the world around me. When I stood in front of the expectant faces, later in the lecture theatre, it was those times where I chose to begin with the ‘thought on the bridge’ that things seemed to settle and the room would come together, to listen, to engage.

I don’t walk across that bridge anymore, but taken metaphorically it provides me with a ‘little ritual’ for stepping back, for just taking a short ‘crossing’ *before speaking* about something else, including someone else’s artwork.

Notes

¹ Roland Barthes, *La Préparation du roman I et II : Cours au collège de France, 1978-1980* [2 CDs] (Paris: Seuil, 2004). NB: The audio recordings are also available open access via the Ubuweb audio archive:

<http://www.ubu.com/sound/barthes.html>

² Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, ed. by Claude Coste, trans. by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

³ The statement on ‘How to Learn Together’, has been adapted from the text by Sunil Manghani, originally used in the context of his teaching at the University of Southampton. It was initially used for the first face-to-face teaching that took place after the period of lockdowns due to the Covid pandemic. The project titled ‘Rituals in Preparation for Talking about Someone Else’s Artwork’, was co-developed by Kate Briggs in the context of a residency hosted by the Art Writing program at Glasgow School of Art.

⁴ Barthes, *How to Live Together*, p. 9.

⁵ Barthes, *How to Live Together*, p. 31.

⁶ Barthes, *How to Live Together*, pp. 131–32.

⁷ Roland Barthes, ‘To the Seminar’, in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 332–42.

⁸ Barthes, ‘To the Seminar’, p. 332.

⁹ Barthes, ‘To the Seminar’, pp. 332–33.

¹⁰ Barthes, ‘To the Seminar’, p. 333.

¹¹ Barthes, ‘To the Seminar’, p. 334. Ellipses in original.

¹² Barthes, ‘To the Seminar’, p. 338.

¹³ Laura Haynes and Kate Briggs, eds, *A Social Process of Unknowing Yourself in Real Time: Work on Conversation* (Glasgow: The Yellow Paper Press, forthcoming 2024).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kate Briggs is a writer, editor and translator based in Rotterdam, where she teaches at the Piet Zwart Institute and co-runs the micro-publishing and collaborative learning project Short Pieces That Move! She is the author of *This Little Art* (an essay on the practice of translation) and *The Long Form* (a novel; shortlisted for the Goldsmiths' Prize and the US Republic of Consciousness Prize). She translated two volumes of Roland Barthes's lecture courses at the Collège de France; her translation of Hélène Bessette's *Lili pleure* will be published in 2025. In 2021 she was awarded a Windham-Campbell Award for non-fiction.

Sunil Manghani is Professor of Theory, Practice and Critique at University of Southampton and a Research Fellow of The Alan Turing Institute. He is managing editor of *Theory, Culture & Society*, and Co-Editor of *Journal of Visual Art Practice*. His books include *Image Studies*; *Zero Degree Seeing*; *India's Biennale Effect*; and *Farewell to Visual Studies*. He curated *Barthes/Burgin* at the John Hansard Gallery, and *Building an Art Biennale* and *Itinerant Objects* at Tate Exchange, Tate Modern.

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