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## Avant-Garde as Pedagogy

Redefining the College Classroom

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# Avant-Garde as Pedagogy:
# Redefining the College Classroom

Marci Mazzarotto,[1] Georgian Court University, USA

*Abstract: This article seeks to add to the existing, yet limited discourse on utilizing avant-garde inspired methods in the college classroom, particularly to foster higher levels of student engagement and promote critical and creative thinking among students—two common pedagogical issues. Central to modern avant-garde movements, such as Dada, Surrealism, and Futurism, was the development and dissemination of easy, simple, creative, and collaborative methods that sought to disrupt established art practices, in turn shifting the power from the institution to the artist. In readapting these practical methods, while grounding them within the theories of critical pedagogy, instructors foster a democratic learning environment that allows for a dynamic and engaging learning experience focused on process over product.*

*Keywords: Avant-Garde, Critical Pedagogy, Progressive Education*

## Introduction

Employing elements derived from modern avant-garde movements as a pedagogical tool in the college classroom first came about as a way of encouraging students to engage with course materials as well as challenging them to think about the content in critical and creative ways. The avant-garde inspired activities proposed herein function as a form of pedagogy of play; that is, students are given the opportunity to "play" with theoretical concepts that could otherwise be difficult to understand, especially in relation to outdated teacher-centered models of learning. The ultimate goal of utilizing avant-garde methods in the college classroom is to combat two common pedagogical issues: lack of student engagement and poor critical thinking skills. By focusing on increasing engagement levels, along with promoting deeper creative and critical thinking, instructors foster a playful space that encourages students to experience personal and academic growth throughout the learning process.

The notion of a pedagogy of play and the employment of avant-garde elements in the college classroom is not a commonplace practice; therefore, it remains experimental in nature. However, pedagogical experiments function as a way to avoid a stale curriculum by affording instructors the possibility to discover what works and does not work in a particular class and why. Even in theory-driven courses (e.g., courses that are neither studio nor lab-based), there is value in addressing theoretical ideas from a practical standpoint, as methods or processes are a key component in student motivation (Williams and Williams 2011). Considering the constant evolution of technology and forms of human communication, which directly impact the wants and needs of the next generation of college graduates, a fusion of theory and hands-on practice (i.e., a focus on process over product) may be more important now than ever before.

A process-focused pedagogical model is not an entirely new concept, as British educational thinker Stenhouse proposed similar ideas in his seminal 1975 book, *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development*. In some ways, Stenhouse (1975) offers a somewhat avant-garde approach to curriculum design, one that is not only student-centered but focused on the flexible, dynamic process of learning (which changes from class to class and semester to semester), rather than on the results based on specific, rigid styles of summative assessments (e.g., content-specific exams). It is helpful to engage with curriculum design as a continuous practice, where an instructor

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guides the students through the learning process. In turn, the primary goal of the article is to add to the ongoing discourse of progressive pedagogical practices by presenting easily adaptable avant-garde methods of play into the college classroom.

The pedagogical ideas proposed herein were inspired by three modernist avant-garde movements (Dada, Surrealism, and Futurism) while being theoretically grounded within critical pedagogy, a theory developed by Brazilian scholar Freire (1968) and the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm, a Jesuit-designed model of progressive education (Society of Jesus 1993). With that said, the pedagogical methods proposed neither guarantee students will engage with nor think creatively or critically about any particular subject matter, as promoting and maintaining high levels of student engagement vary widely depending on context. Factors such as students' personal, cultural, and/or academic context should be taken into account by instructors when evaluating the level of success of a particular assignment and the ways in which it can be effectively redesigned for future use. Nevertheless, the projects and activities addressed throughout have demonstrated, via summative or formative assessments, to be effective in engaging students with course content in creative and critical ways, especially considering future tweaks that provide for a better space to deploy avant-garde as pedagogy of play.

As previously mentioned, introducing play into the curriculum is still not common practice today, particularly in higher education; however, it has long been advocated by educators ranging from Dewey to Plato (Mardell et al. 2016). While it takes a bit of preliminary planning, transforming a curriculum to include play elements (even if only at a single assignment level) is ultimately not a difficult process, particularly when readapting or reinventing existing playful activities from the avant-garde. Instructors may increase student engagement and make the learning process more dynamic for students by simply moving away from historically traditional modes of education, such as the teacher-centered lecture (Sarrica 2018) and the five-paragraph essay (Warner 2016), by instead introducing a student-created group lecture or multimedia blog writing. The latter examples not only fuse contemporary technology into the learning activity but also allow students to collaboratively work with one another to synthesize course content, in turn transforming the learning process from a passive to an active one.

The avant-garde emphasized process over product, as they saw value in the learning experience itself, failures and all. The same philosophy applies to a learner-centered environment, although more often than not, assignments ask students to discuss content in relation to what has been addressed in class rather than to critically analyze the content in creative ways. This is particularly true when greater emphasis is placed on exams. While in specific fields, where testing and accreditation is the norm (e.g., nursing), emphasizing content mastery makes sense; however, in the arts and humanities, there is far greater flexibility in focusing lesson plans on the process. Introductory composition courses are one example where there is much more emphasis on the process of writing itself rather than a finished essay. Ultimately, critical thinking is not facilitated by a teaching approach that is focused on content over process (i.e., on what to think instead of how to think) (Gul et al. 2014); thus, instructors must challenge students to go beyond superficial discussion or content analysis and dedicate additional time to developing the pedagogical process itself in order to deepen student's ability to think critically and creatively.

## The Avant-Garde

So, how exactly do avant-garde inspired methods assist instructors in developing a process-focused curriculum that encourages critical and creative thinking while fostering student engagement? First, this article presumes the importance of student engagement (Caruth 2018) and critical or creative thinking (Bean 2011) as key elements to the learning process, as addressed by numerous existing scholarly research articles. Second, the immediate goal herein is to provide an introduction, along with some experimental and practical examples, on ways in which to easily adapt avant-garde methods as a form of pedagogy of play—it is not meant as a "be-all and end-all" of curriculum design. Lastly,

instructors do not need to have a deeply ingrained level of understanding of the avant-garde nor of its specific art movements to employ its creative methods in the classroom. In fact, fundamental activities like "cut and paste" owe their origins to the avant-garde. Thus, in some ways, the avant-garde has infiltrated our lives in ways that are sometimes not immediately obvious.

The answer to the above question is, on the surface, relatively simple but becomes more complex depending upon the context. The modernist avant-garde was often playful by nature, and its artistic processes were easy to follow (and to complete), requiring little-to-no expertise or practical skill. Since the modernist avant-garde sought to be an "attack" on the established institute of art at the time (e.g., Impressionism) and its accompanying elitist attitude, these movements often allowed anyone to participate in them so long as they shared a mutual goal. Additionally, the avant-garde was less about the art object (i.e., content) and more about experimental research (i.e., process), as they developed strategies and activities specifically to disrupt a number of established norms. Of course, their artistic input as the end product is what ultimately garnered them worldwide attention (e.g., Salvador Dali), in turn being adapted into mainstream creative practices (e.g., Hollywood film), but rarely within an academic context. Hence the goal of this article.

To unpack the above paragraph a bit more: avant-garde practices were simple, creative, and quasi-academic as avant-garde artists creatively sought to answer questions about the human condition in easy, non-technical ways, often through artistic and experimental research. For example, the Dadaists took pride in being nonsensical and often created collage-type works in order to disrupt what was seen as "art" in the 1910s. By creating cut and paste collages of various letters and images, particularly for political purposes, Dada artists brought forth a uniquely simple way of creating art (e.g., Hannah Höch's *Cut with the Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch*). Dada was seen as ridiculous and absurd, but nowadays, their works are completely normal, having been adapted into numerous contexts from preschool classroom activities to the computerized world (Manovich 1999).

Surrealists drew heavily on Freud's theories of the unconscious and dream analysis, often seeking to conduct research on the human mind by creating free association activities like automatic writing. Futurists were a bit more dangerous in the respect that they subscribed to misogynistic and fascistic ideologies; however, their creative methods were also simplistic in that they were the first to discuss the importance in the industrialization of sound (which stands as the historical precursor to the extremely popular genre of contemporary electronic dance music, a.k.a. EDM). Although knowing the underlying philosophy of any given avant-garde movement certainly does not hinder the process of adapting its methods into a college curriculum, it is not necessary. In fact, devolving too deep into explaining avant-garde practices may needlessly make the process murkier for both instructor and student.

Discussing elements of the avant-garde with students and then immediately asking them to mimic avant-garde methods often leads to confusion because students may hyper-focus on the idea of the "avant-garde," a notoriously difficult term to define, and then choose to simply give up on completing the exercise. Although research indicates that instructor explanation of abstract concepts and well-organized presentations positively impacts students' critical thinking (Shim and Walczak 2012), implicitly engaging students with the avant-garde is more effective than overly explaining the topic. This is not to imply that students should be completely unaware of avant-garde methods (on the contrary, they should become familiar with the fundamentals); however, depending on the course, instructors should encourage students to create avant-garde work without making it explicit that they are doing so.

For example, in teaching Surrealism as an avant-garde art movement, students were tasked with completing an assignment using surrealist methods, such as automatic writing—a free-flowing writing process devoid of preliminary drafting or revision editing. Subsequently, students work on contextualizing assigned topics as part of the process in completing the project. Recognizing that many instructors would not find themselves teaching students about avant-garde movements directly, but perhaps simply employing avant-garde methods, providing students with

a baseline rationale for the method is helpful. In the case of automatic writing, the rationale is simple: write exactly what comes to mind without any editing whatsoever. This remarkably simple exercise helps students develop a literary voice and build their confidence, as the fear of being wrong or writing badly is completely removed—automatic writing is purposely designed to tap into the unconscious mind to remove engrained formalities.

However, instructors delving into complex detail about the how's and why's of avant-garde methods distracts students from completing the assignment, as a lack of understanding Freudian theory does not prevent students in benefiting from the unconscious free-association inherent in automatic writing exercises. Students can and should know the contextual basis for the exercise, but class time does not need to be dedicated to learning its nuances in-depth. Implicitly following avant-garde methods eliminates the possibility of indoctrinating students into specific modes of creative production. When given the freedom and opportunity to be creative, particularly in an arts and humanities setting, students do demonstrate a surprisingly high level of insight and interest into a topic originally thought to be beyond their education level (Daly et al. 2016). The key, then, is to provide students with a space for self-learning that promotes creative and academic freedom, which is a central tenet of critical pedagogy.

## Critical Pedagogy

In his seminal book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), Freire brings forth the argument on how sociopolitical and economic systems, as well as education itself, are inherently oppressive institutions propagating an agenda that falsely promises the opposite: liberation. In turn, the larger goal of teachers and students alike is to recognize the oppressive systems operating in society and to subsequently transform them. As Freire explains:

> The pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanist and libertarian pedagogy, has two distinct stages. In the first stage, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through praxis, commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation. In both stages, it is always through action in depth that the culture of domination is culturally confronted. (Freire 1968, 54)

As Freire (1968) argues above, a key element to flipping the script on an oppressive system is praxis, which is the act of taking a theory or idea and realizing or engaging with it in a practical form. This is not at all a new concept, as philosophers like Plato and Aristotle were discussing its significance thousands of years ago; however, the importance in the fusion of theory and practice in the classroom is stressed here precisely because it is still not the standard in education. Granted, instituting Freire's (1968) educational ideology at the K-12 level proves to be an even greater challenge than within higher education (due to complex issues like public funding and standardized testing), but nevertheless, critical pedagogy is not standard practice at the university level either due to its own set of political hurdles.

For anyone familiar with the scope of Freire's academic work, beyond its basic tenets, understands that what he proposes does not and cannot function on a wide scale as it would largely mean the end of higher education as we know it. However, Freire's work is highly applicable in the classroom setting as a way of guiding students on how to think critically. When students are given the proper tools in which they can take personal and direct responsibility in their learning process, it often does not take them long to recognize they are part of an oppressive system. The tricky part is in fundamentally transforming that system—work that likely begins after graduation and may take a lifetime to achieve.

Avant-gardists' goals parallel Freire's: to fundamentally disrupt an oppressive and elitist system (i.e., the institutionalized art world) by giving power and voice to those without (i.e., struggling artists), and "One of the main characteristics of avant garde [sic] was going against the

academic understanding of art, the imposed rules on what an artwork should look like and the way it should be produced" (Widewalls Editorial 2016). By breaking established rules, artists were seen to be at the forefront of artistic movements. For example, Dada introduced the concept of the ready-made and fundamentally brought forth the question of what exactly could be considered art, as anything and everything was art for Dadaists. Perhaps the most famous example of a ready-made is Marcel Duchamp's *The Fountain* (1917)—a used urinal, flipped on its side that he jokingly introduced to an international art exhibition in New York City.

Surrealists, who thought of themselves more as a group of experimental researchers than artists, took great pride in conducting social experiments within the visual arts, specifically as means of further understanding the human condition, such as going to watch films in a movie theatre while partially covering their eyes (in order to obscure components of the film, therefore viewing them in an absurd and partially fragmented manner) or playing a game of exquisite corpse, which consists of a group of individuals blindly adding words or images on a single piece of paper to create a new, collective meaning. For Futurists, the focus was on creating a male-driven, industrialized, and weaponized society where technology was central to all elements of artistic production and distribution. Luckily, Futurist ideology largely remained confined to the written words within their manifesto, not having come to fruition in real life; however, their assessment and promulgation of utilizing technology for various artistic means (e.g., music and photography) fundamentally revolutionized the art world.

Regardless of their respective agendas, these three avant-garde movements specifically sought to shift the power from the institution to the individual as a sort of democratic and collective process of artistic reinvention. Dadaists, Surrealists, Futurists, and Freire were working from a similar foundational context: find and understand the oppressive power, transform that power through praxis, then seek liberation by shifting the power from the oppressor to the oppressed. At the lesson level, this is accomplished by using specific activities that place students in control of their own learning process, but understanding foundational context, both in relation to theory (content) and practice (praxis), proves key to shifting the power from instructor to learner. Otherwise, students are stuck in a passive learning mode.

Students should be presented with opportunities to understand that ideas do not develop in a vacuum as there are inherent connections among topics, disciplines, etc., which can be accomplished by first appreciating the basic context of a given topic. If nothing else, students must be guided away from ignorance and delusional thinking. When I first began teaching, my course assignments were more rudimentary in format than they are now (e.g., print vs. digital formats), but the assignments nonetheless included key elements designed to aid in student understanding (e.g., reflection exercises). Besides assignments and activities designed to include the idea of context and connections, these have since been redeveloped to include a more experimental, avant-garde approach that is less oppressive to students' academic development as it gives them freedom of personal expression while simultaneously challenging critical thought about a given topic. Such examples are discussed in subsequent sections.

I have designed many of my out-of-class assignments, whether theory and/or practice-based, to follow a three-part graded process, generally referred to as (1) pre-writing, (2) writing, and (3) post-writing. It was only more recently that I decided to include a post-writing exercise and did so because it is a valuable feedback tool for the instructor as well as a great reflective experience for students. I employed a pre-writing exercise from the beginning of my teaching career, although it has become more robust in recent years. The pre-writing serves as a project proposal where students are tasked with conducting preliminary research about their topic in order to contextualize it as well as to begin thinking and making external connections to another topic and/or field of study. While it does generate a bit more work for the instructor, the pre-writing exercises are designed in a straightforward manner that allows me to grade and return the proposals to students on the same day of submission.

The proposals include a set of open-ended questions (specific to the assigned project and grade level) that give students guidance on the core ideas that must be present within the project while also allowing enough creative flexibility. Students are given one week from the project assigned

date to complete the pre-writing, and on submission day, in-class time is allotted for students to peer-review with one another while they await instructor feedback on their proposals. Ultimately, proposals encourage students to remain on track and reduce the chances of procrastinating with a major assignment. Proposals also give instructors preliminary feedback that reveals specific challenges students face and, in turn, provides enough time to assist students in course-correcting to successfully complete the project. Additionally, making the pre- and post-writing exercises a graded component of the main assignment encourages students to take an interest in completing these brief exercises in a timely manner. Of course, there may be a student or two who does not complete these exercises, perhaps viewing them as busy-work; however, in assessing my own classroom experiences, employing pre- and post-exercises help the vast majority of students through the learning process (demonstrated by greater levels of engagement and motivation) that lead to higher quality work, which in turn translates to grades above an 80 percent benchmark.

## Ignatian Pedagogy

The exercises above are used to illustrate the importance of developing and understanding context, which is the first step in being able to properly assess and situate a person or argument within its greater, connected context (i.e., part of the basic principle in shifting the power from the oppressor to the oppressed). As previously discussed, Freire's (1968) notion of critical pedagogy, while incredibly valuable, ceases to function in its applicability as a wide-reaching institutional reform. Therefore, we must apply Freire's theories at the classroom level, and the Jesuits, an academically inclined clergy sect of the Catholic church, provides a more directly applicable model on how to do so, titled the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (IPP), also known as Ignatian pedagogy. Recognizing that most instructors may neither want nor need a religious or spiritual angle within their pedagogical pursuits, it should be noted that, while IPP is inspired by the fifteenth-century spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius, it can be easily applied to a secular classroom environment. The IPP is:

> founded on the belief that education has to go beyond the mere transmission of information from professor to student. More than an exercise in memorization or a purely cognitive transaction, education is meant to be a transformational experience that affects the students on all levels—cognitive, certainly, but also emotional and behavioral. The student who has been through this kind of experience will have had old ideas unsettled in the service of developing a fuller understanding of self and the world, and in service of helping that world. (Teaching Commons, n.d.)

Ultimately, Ignatian pedagogy is focused on the respectful guidance of the whole individual through a journey of personal growth, critical analysis, thoughtful reflection, and active citizenship (Teaching Commons, n.d.). Below is a visual graph of IPP's five central elements and its process flow:



Figure 1: Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm Process
*Source: Teaching Commons, n.d.*

The biggest difference in the way context is employed in my classroom versus the way IPP employs it is that students are challenged to focus on building the context of the topic (e.g., through completion of the pre-writing exercise), whereas IPP requests for the instructor to build context of the student (Teaching Commons, n.d.). In other words, context-based exercises in my courses focus on the relationship between student and topic, and IPP's context focus is that of the student's personal life and their relationship with the instructor and the topic. What is important to note here is that Ignatian pedagogy is robust and perhaps a bit difficult to fully employ in every single assignment, but its five core elements are useful in slightly different ways and with varying degrees of applicability. In other words, an instructor may choose to focus more time on developing experience vs. context, for example, and the ways in which each element is brought into the assignment is adjustable depending on grade level and content.

While I do not use IPP in the strictest sense, I have found great value in its method and have since revised the way context-based exercises are utilized throughout my courses. My pre-writing exercises now ask students to not only contextualize the topic itself but to also contextualize themselves within the topic. Such a contextualization creates a personal relationship between the student and the topic, simultaneously challenging them to make additional connections. For example, a student tasked with contextualizing the film *Citizen Kane* researches its basic story and production details (i.e., director, ideology, main characters, narrative, filming locations, etc.) and subsequently realizes that she shares the same birthplace as Orson Welles (and so on and so forth). In taking context one step further, I also attempt to curate my course content depending on a given context. Since I teach media and communication in New Jersey, *War of the Worlds* is always a fun media reference in classroom discussion, as students automatically feel connected to its fictional storyline since it takes place in the real, unincorporated community of Grover Mills, NJ.

The discovery of a minor personal connection may initially appear to be irrelevant. However, English professor Ulmer and colleagues (2015), famous for proposing new rhetoric appropriate for the electronic age, argues there is merit in students' personal discovery and connection to course materials, as it aids in developing their "mystory." As Ulmer et al. (2015, 199) describe, "a mystory is to learning, to the experience of a person as learner, what history historiography—is to the collective experience of a people…It is a representation of the exchange across discourses that happens in the invention process." The invention process depends on "circulation of ideas through the principal discourses and their institutions organizing our culture," and can begin within a student's personal context and its relationship to the course, the topic at hand, the instructor, and/or the college as institution (Ulmer et al. 2015, 199). Much like critical pedagogy demands that the oppressed contextualize their place within the oppressive system, or the modernist avant-garde demands a reinvention of art via the creation and circulation of new cultural contexts, Ulmer et al.'s (2015) *mystory* process and the five elements of Ignatian pedagogy all serve a similar pedagogical path toward personal liberation.

Equally important to the pre-writing exercises in the creation of foundational context is the post-writing exercise, which I found to be most helpful when administered at the end of the semester after final projects have been completed and submitted. At the post-writing level, students are tasked with reflecting upon their experiences, both at the project level as well as the course overall, in turn giving them the opportunity to place themselves within the context of their learning journey after it has been completed. Reflections are an excellent way for students to synthesize the process rather than just the topic as it is focused on evaluating the learning experience and the knowledge gained after the assignment is done. Reflective exercises encourage students to directly engage with their thoughts and feelings about their experiences and explain any personal challenges and successes in the process of project completion. While their feedback is also helpful to the instructor in future lesson planning, reflections tend to be more valuable to the students as a way to not only voice their opinions, in turn making them feel valued and respected as individual thinkers, but it also provides a space in which students reconnect with the knowledge they gained in the learning process.

Making the reflection, a graded component further incentivizes students to complete it, mainly because most students do not want to unnecessarily lose points. However, instructors should be careful in allocating an appropriate amount of grade points relative to the required effort and level of difficulty for a given assignment; consequently, the pre- and post-exercise should carry a weighted total that is sufficient enough to encourage students to complete it but not overwhelming as to overshadow the importance of the main assignment. Of course, these totals can shift from project to project and from course to course. As an example, for an intro level 750-word film critique, I allot a total of eighty points for the main assignment, and the other twenty points for the pre- and post-exercises, with ten points allotted to each respectively. Students still have the ability to pass the assignment, even without completing either the pre- or post-exercise, but the overall quality of their work and/or final grades will likely suffer.

I stress the importance of appropriate grade allocation because grades (and assessments in general), although directly opposed to the philosophy of the avant-garde and of critical pedagogy, nevertheless play a vital role in the academic journey for both teachers and students. Thus, we must strive for a balanced pedagogical approach that satisfies the formal requirements of accredited institutions while also enlightening students to the inherently oppressive nature of said institutions—it is a difficult dance to master, but I argue that introducing even small portions of the ideas presented herein helps students move away from the wholly familiar and comfortable. After all, part of the college experience is centered on opening up students' minds and experiences to a more rounded world view, which may very well be in direct conflict with the sociopolitical ideologies of one's formative years.

Creating and existing within a new and uncomfortable space was fundamental to the core essence of being avant-garde, regardless of the movements' collective goals. Avant-garde artists often indulged themselves with simplistic, seemingly nonsensical, creative, and collaborative "outside the box" activities in order to push and break down the boundaries of the established art world. Translating the avant-garde approach into the classroom, while bearing in mind the underlying principles of critical pedagogy, is an easy and powerful tool in getting students engaged (by simply encouraging them to step out of their comfort zone).

Now, in understanding the basic tenets of the three avant-garde movements previously discussed, as well as the two pedagogical perspectives that seek to foster a progressive learning environment, what is described in the following pages (with specific examples attached in the appendixes) are two proposed activities adaptable to a college classroom in order to promote student engagement and foster critical and creative thinking. The first activity is a variation of the traditional in-class student presentation, and the second is a fresh take on the traditional research essay. Both assignments were developed within the context of a sophomore-level survey course on contemporary humanities that covered a wide range of artistic, cultural, and technological movements and innovations from 1900 through the 2000s; however, these proposed activities are fluid and adaptable to a variety of other disciplinary contexts, and instructors are encouraged to do so as a means of fulfilling their own pedagogical goals.

## Activity: Performance

One of the main challenges in my humanities course was to get students engaged with the plethora of different disciplines we covered throughout the semester, especially those that students deemed less interesting, such as literature. Each chapter of our course text (*The Humanistic Tradition* by Gloria K. Fiero) covered various literary figures and movements, beginning with T. S. Eliot and Robert Frost and ending with Chinua Achebe and Sandra Cisneros. While each chapter also discussed more relevant media such as music, students continuously demonstrated the most difficulty in engaging with literature. It was not uncommon for class discussion to come to a halt when covering the literary sections, even though generally, most of the class had read the assigned materials. Literature was also not a

main component to any of the course chapters, so it did receive less attention in class than other segments; however, I felt it was important for students to critically engage with various literary movements as well as their respective key figures.

With that, small in-class group exercises were created to increase student engagement with the materials and also as a way of removing the fear of engaging with the content solo. There was a higher likelihood of students engaging with literature if they not only had the support of fellow students but that the activity did not directly involve reading and recitation. The first time this literature exercise was employed in the classroom, it followed a more traditional format, as it asked students to verbally describe key elements of the story in order to highlight their understanding of the assigned readings. In experimenting with devising different in-class activities to increase student engagement (with literature specifically), the exercise was transformed from a traditional group presentation into an avant-garde group performance. Both variations of the activity include students working and collaborating with one another; however, in a group presentation, students get together and create a mini-lecture based on the assigned readings, whereas a performance takes the activity one step further by challenging students to get creative in the ways in which to deliver the mini-lecture. Employing a more collaborative in-class activity demonstrated success in increasing overall student engagement more so than attempting to engage students using more traditional instructor-led discussion and activities.

Rather than a separate assignment grade, students received a participation grade reflective of their engagement with the activity and their peers; thus, higher levels of student engagement with the activity and their peers meant higher participation grades for the day. An immediate concern should not be the quality of the students' performance but rather the quality of student interactions with one another, their interpretation of the prompt, and the level of creativity displayed. Some students may create a performance that ends up showcasing poor acting skills but simultaneously demonstrates a solid understanding of course materials. Other students may create a great performance acting-wise but fail to demonstrate a working knowledge of the assigned literature pieces. The group with content knowledge but a lack of acting skills receives the higher grade. If anything, the intellectual insight coupled with lack of skill is exemplary of avant-garde art rather than the other way around.

One of the biggest challenges in employing the lit activity in the classroom is to get students excited about it in the first place: "Empirical evidence suggests that teacher-student interaction and interaction among students influence the students' cognitive and affective learning outcomes" (Gul et al. 2014, 38). Thus, placing students into small groups helped tremendously, as students were able to discuss their ideas with peers prior to sharing them with the rest of class. Additionally, the activity gives instructors more in-class time to work closely with groups of students rather than each student individually. Simply tweaking the exercise from an activity that students were familiar and comfortable in both format and delivery (i.e., group lecture) to one where familiarity was present but distant (i.e., performance) allowed students a space to engage with materials in a far more entertaining manner.

When thinking about avant-garde performance used within a pedagogical context, Brazilian dramatist Augusto Boal comes to mind. Using the theoretical underpinnings of Freire's (1968) critical pedagogy, Boal created Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), a nuanced and multifaced form of theatrical engagement that seeks to give power and voice to those without, specifically in attempts to disrupt systems of oppression. TO is perhaps the most well-known and well-developed form of avant-garde performance directly inspired by Freire's work. Boal, who was also an activist and politician, created TO specifically to function as an instrument for revolutionary causes (much like the modernist avant-garde movements decades before). Boal developed the concept of "spect-actor" (a fusion between a passive spectator and an active actor), a foundational concept of TO, as it calls for direct participation from any willing individual, not just actors (Gewertz 2003). As a financially secure white male, Boal initially had difficulties gathering participation from oppressed minority groups in Brazil until he decided to give them a voice directly (through participatory theatre), which in turn allowed Boal to properly deflect his own presence as their perceived oppressor.

Being aware that his race and socioeconomic status automatically defaulted him to the status of an oppressor (in a similar way that it can with a teacher with privileged education working in a poor, inner-city school), Boal was nonetheless successful in engaging his students by giving them the power to act, speak, create, and manipulate the theatre in any way they chose. Boal strongly believed that theatre could bring forth liberation from oppression and stated that "*the poetics of the oppressed* is essentially the poetics of liberation: the spectator no longer delegates power to the characters either to think or to act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself! Theatre is action!" (Wardrip-Fruin and Montfort 2003, 352, emphasis in the original). Similar to a critical pedagogue, Boal was a facilitator, not an indoctrinator; thus, his philosophy of democratic theater is a powerful example of avant-garde as pedagogy.

Boal eventually held an elected office in the Brazilian government (as a councilman) and successfully applied his theory of TO to democratize the challenging atmosphere of Brazilian politics. He did so by developing a concept known as legislative theatre, which encourages individuals to voice their opinions, in turn creating a two-way flow of communication between politicians and voters. More than a dozen laws were created and signed into legislature during and immediately following Boal's tenure in government. Boal's avant-garde methods were successful as democratizing tools because he employed these methods with pedagogical implications. Boal used the avant-garde as a way to encourage participation and collaboration among individuals of all walks of life and did so with the purpose of liberating them from the oppression of the established institution. With a basic understanding of avant-garde as pedagogy, instructors can elicit the same amount of change in their own classrooms.

When a small-scale rendition of TO was initially employed in an Intercultural Communication course, it was met with minor success, as students struggled to understand the underlying ideology of Boal's theories, partly because not enough time was allotted for project completion. Since students failed to understand TO's basic tenets, they shied away from doing anything too creative and ultimately delivered a very basic, scripted lecture. In the second rendition of the same course, I rectified this minor mishap by dedicating additional time (both in and out of class) for students to work with one another in order to understand avant-garde performance, critical pedagogy, and the ways in which TO seeks to fulfill the intersection between both. The results were incredible. One group of students created a video performance piece that meaningfully criticized mass media for creating and distributing fake news. Students were given basic directions on project completion, which focused more on content rather than format, and were encouraged to get as creative as possible. And so, they did. A sample of this in-class activity is found in Appendix A.

## Project: Video Collage

The original (and traditional) written essay form for the final project in my humanities course was relatively successful in engaging students and challenging them to think critically. It was redeveloped into a more practical, fun project that challenged students to think and create like avant-garde artists. Although this particular project redesign did not get the chance to be deployed in the originally intended humanities course, the project is nevertheless easily adaptable across disciplines and various subject matters. The newly designed final humanities project tasks students with producing a two- to three-minute video collage illustrating their knowledge and understanding of two major themes discussed in class during the course of the semester. One component is a philosophical perspective (i.e., Freudian theory) and the other an artistic movement (i.e., Surrealism), both of which are randomly assigned to students, in turn encouraging them to get even more creative in terms of how to connect two perspectives that initially seem unrelated to one another.

The process of a random selection of assignment topics was relatively simple: select several philosophical perspectives and artistic movements that were covered throughout the semester in the course text, write them down on index cards, and make separate piles for each theme. Then, the cards are placed in two separate containers, selecting one philosophical perspective and one artistic

movement, and randomly assigning that combination to a student, whose name was selected by literally drawing the written names from a hat. The exercise of drawing names out of a hat may seem silly, but it serves to keep the instructor's mind and actions within the scope of avant-garde practices: "If teachers aim to prepare students at a higher level of cognitive thinking" (Ball and Garton 2005, 59), then "they must first emulate higher level[s] thinking in their [own] instructional practices" (Gul et al. 2014, 38). In turn, instructors should take practical steps in order to literally practice what they preach (if and when it is possible). Instructors should not only think critically and creatively about each assignment they develop, but they should also go through the entire process of completing the assignment in order to understand its challenges, opportunities, and flaws, even though such an experimental process is often not practical until the second or third iteration of teaching a particular course.

While it is important to guarantee fairness in the random selection process of topics for students' projects, there is also a need to reduce possible redundancies. Additionally, instructors should ensure fairness in the level of project difficulty in order to avoid some students being inadvertently disadvantaged with a difficult topic, while other students take advantage of having been assigned an easier one. Redundancies are reduced by ensuring that most, if not all, students are given different topics, in addition to avoiding assigning topics extensively covered in class that would not require much critical or creative thinking. In the general scope of my humanities survey course, it was not uncommon for students to initially struggle with making connections between the assigned topics, as they often sought connections to be as explicit as Freud's influence on Surrealism, for example.

However, many students got creative in their approach to assigned projects. In a previous iteration of this assignment (focused more specifically on writing about an artistic movement), one student beautifully illustrated Surrealism's influence on Dr. Seuss, while another student argued the connection between the Harlem Renaissance and Bob Marley's music. When replacing the assignment's traditional compositional elements with a hands-on, creative one (i.e., written essay versus video collage), the ways in which students approach their project may differ greatly, particularly because students are much more comfortable with writing despite not often enjoying doing so. Although some students do not feel comfortable with creating their own photographs or shooting video (at least initially), they generally prefer to spend time creating a visual art piece rather than writing an essay. This is where trial and error comes into play, given the discipline and context of a particular course.

Whether assigning traditional or more creative projects, students should be given clear directions in terms of what is expected for successful completion. For every project assigned in my courses, students are provided with a single-point rubric that clearly outlines the parameters and goals for the given assignment, as well as sections for "needs improvement" and "exceeds expectations." All of the information given to students to successfully complete the assignment is the same information used to evaluate them. Unsurprisingly, some students choose to ignore instructions, as well as the transparency in the evaluation process, and end up performing poorly. However, the rubric should be used to align and assess learning objectives with the project, and its directions should be clear enough to avoid confusion but open enough to allow for creativity. Again, determining these specific points varies depending on discipline, course content, and the instructors' preference.

Challenges arise when students themselves are intimidated by a project they initially perceive too difficult. As aforementioned, detailed single-point rubrics are provided in order to properly guide students in completing their project, as there must be some sort of formalized assessment. It is also a good idea to remind students that, despite a few necessary guidelines for project evaluation, they are encouraged to be as creative as they wish. Often, the biggest challenge between a creative project and a written one is the students' fear of the unknown. When it comes to essay writing, despite disliking the activity, all students are quite familiar with the process, particularly by the time they reach their third or fourth year in college. In turn, students do not often fear writing an essay because it is a familiar and formulaic activity, but

that familiarity is problematic, hence the need for creative pedagogical tools to redefine classroom activities. A sample of this out-of-class assignment with accompanying pre-and post-writing exercises can be found in Appendix B.

## Conclusion and Further Research

Breaking away from the familiar is key in encouraging and challenging students to think both critically and creatively. As mentioned throughout this article, the avant-garde did the same: they challenged established norms of traditional institutions by being experimental, devised new ways of creating and distributing art, worked to be collaborative and democratic in their approach, and if nothing else, they continuously sought to move away from everything that was both familiar and formulaic (Higgins 2003). Neither instructor nor student needs to possess a deep knowledge or understanding of the avant-garde, critical pedagogy, or media technologies, for that matter, in order to use any or all of these elements in the classroom. Basic knowledge is sufficient, especially technologically speaking, as video-editing software (e.g., iMovie) is more user-friendly now than ever before, and avant-garde methods, like Dadaist collage, are self-explanatory (e.g., cut and paste).

This article illustrates some of my personal experiences (both proposed and executed) in experimenting with creative pedagogy as a college instructor, but by no means should what is described here limit the applicability to only college-level arts and humanities or related courses. Although my pedagogical focus and experience remain exclusively with college students, the ultimate goal is for such methods to be adapted and employed throughout the educational system, and as the two examples above demonstrate, the only true limitation to the appropriation of avant-garde methods in the classroom may reside with the instructors. Consequently, I encourage all instructors, regardless of discipline or grade level, to challenge themselves to appropriate some element of avant-garde methods as pedagogical tools.

I also encourage fellow scholars to continue the discourse, research, and experimentation on the various creative ways in which to engage students. This article is not meant to illustrate the best nor the only way to successfully address issues regarding low levels of student engagement or the lack of creative and critical thinking, nor is it a full remedy for such issues. What I illustrate throughout is a new, and hopefully effective, way to partially address the pedagogical issues that are so commonplace throughout higher education. There is plenty of room for additional experimentation in curriculum development, as well as pedagogical research, and I hope that the argument and examples presented throughout, however brief, effectively add to that discourse. Lastly, instructors and scholars alike are welcome to borrow, readapt, and reinvent any and/or all avant-garde inspired ideas that are discussed and to do so for the fulfillment of their own pedagogical goals.

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## Appendix A: In-Class Activity Performance

## Literature Activity: Liberation and Equality

Each group has been assigned one line randomly taken from the course reading. Working together, you will use that line as inspiration to create a 30 to 60 second performance art piece. You have complete artistic freedom in creating your group performance – there are no rules.

But there are a couple of purposeful restrictions: every member of the group must participate, and you will have a total of 60 minutes to complete the exercise – that time includes planning and rehearsing. The last half of the class will be dedicated to performance and discussion.

**Group One**: Richard Wright's *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow* (page 102-104)

"Each time I closed my eyes I saw monstrous white faces suspended from the ceiling, leering at me."

**Group Two**: Virginia Woof's *A Room of One's Own* (pages 116-117)

"Let me imagine, since facts are hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say."

**Group Three**: Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* (pages 117-118)

"They have gained only what men have been willing to grant; they have taken nothing, they have only received."

**Group Four**: Alice Walker's *Elethia* (pages 108-109)

"And she was careful that, no matter how compelling the hype, Uncle Alberts, in her own mind, were never permitted to exist."

**Group Five**: MLK's *Letter from Birmingham's Jail* (pages 104-106)

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

## Appendix B: Out-of-Class Project Video Collage

## Final Project

For the final project, you will be randomly assigned a philosophical perspective and an artistic movement that we have covered so far in class. Researching more information on your given topics, you will then create a two to three-minute video collage that highlights your content knowledge and makes a solid connection between the philosophy and the art movement.

To be successfully, you must think of yourself as an avant-garde artist. Be creative and experimental. Do not be afraid to venture away from course materials in order to make the necessary interdisciplinary connections. The midterm project is designed for you to further develop your critical thinking skills, while demonstrating content knowledge.

As with all other assignments this semester, in addition to the main project, you will have a pre- and post- writing exercise, which are designed to help both you and I, in the completion of your project. Think of your midterm as a three-part process:

- <u>Context</u>:　　　Contextualize the topic
- <u>Experience</u>:　　Research, analyze, create, and experiment
- <u>Reflection</u>:　　Reflect on your experience

After you've done the preliminary research and outlined aspects of your project, you will begin selecting specific media for your video collage. You can use any and type of media you'd like, but must at least include music, text, and images.

I encourage you to create some images yourself, but you are not required to do so. You are required, however, to make the video collage yourself, even if none of the content you are using is your own. Since it is being made for educational purposes, there are no copyright issues.

While you are also encouraged to creatively think-outside-the box, there are several assignment guidelines you must follow in order to receive a passing grade. <u>The video collage must</u>:

1.　Be at least two minutes, but no more than three minutes long.

2.　Be an original composition that was made by you and only you.
　　a.　There are many free and easy-to-use video editing options online.

3.　Include some text, music, and a variety of images.
　　a.　Creating your own music and/or images is not required but encouraged.

4.　Logically connect the philosophical perspective with the art movement.
　　a.　Demonstrate course knowledge and ability to think critically and creatively.

5.　Clearly convey your understanding of the topic.
　　a.　Video needs to make logical sense to the viewer (e.g. other students in class)

## Project Proposal

The proposal is preliminary research, where the main point of the exercise is to contextualize the topic at hand by asking basic questions: *Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How?* After answering these questions, you can then proceed to the next step, which is learning more about the topic and how it relates to you personally, as well as the world as a whole. The main point of the assignment is to inspire you to think critically about a particular issue, and this is not so much about being right or wrong, but more about your thoughts and contributions to the Humanities.

Topic:

Principal players:

Interdisciplinary connections:

1.　Explain at least two things that make this topic important and relevant.

2.　Explain your familiarity with the topic.

3.　What criticisms would someone else possibly have about this topic?

4.　Describe at least two new and interesting facts that you learned in your research.

## Project Reflection

In reflecting, your goal is to think about your personal thought process when creating and completing this assignment. You need to move beyond the idea of: "I don't like this assignment because it's too hard, too confusing, too boring, etc.," or "I'm not interested in doing any of this." Laziness, boredom, closed-mindedness is not conducive to learning and growing as a person. So, think about your experience a bit more critically. You may have loved or hated partaking in this project, but fully explain the reasons why you felt the way you did. Be sure to describe what you learned and how you may see yourself using that knowledge in the future.

1. Describe what you enjoyed about this project.

2. Describe what you disliked about this project.

3. What part of this project did you connect to your personal life? Explain.

4. What social/political issue did this project inspire you take action in the future?

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