Deborah Mutnick

Pathways to Freedom: From the Archives to the Street

This article describes how a first-year learning community combining library, archival, and digital literacies facilitated students’ grasp of threshold concepts of academic research and writing. It argues that critical-rhetorical processes and pedagogies can help counteract neoliberal educational trends that interpellate students as consumers rather than learners.

Pathways to Freedom is a first-year learning community that links history and composition in a yearlong study of the idea of freedom, particularly with respect to black history in Brooklyn, New York. It evolved as part of a Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS) project to bring first-year college students into the archives and a newly created campus-wide learning community program that I was appointed to codirect in 2011. When a wave of extrajudicial violence against black people started in 2012 with the murder of Trayvon Martin by vigilante George Zimmerman, giving birth to a new civil rights movement, Pathways themes of freedom and African American history resonated in ways we could not anticipate in the “post-racial” moment.
of its inception in 2011. The curriculum became a portal through which students could begin to grasp historical and rhetorical threshold concepts as interrelated, dialectical processes enabling critical inquiry as a basis for discovery and integration of “troublesome” knowledge and skills. In what follows, I argue first that such integrative, rigorous pedagogy supports the development of critical consciousness, and second that it resists the neoliberal evisceration of higher education that, at its worst, renders such transformative learning impossible.

Specifically, I link Jan H. F. Meyer and Ray Land’s theory of threshold concepts that allow “a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress” (Meyer et al. ix) to what Luis S. Villacañas de Castro calls the “epistemological obstacles” to learning that require the learner to come to terms with his or her subjective relationship to the object of study (Critical Pedagogy; see also Adler-Kassner and Wardle). It is this “troublesome” aspect of threshold concepts that Villacañas de Castro illuminates with respect to underlying processes—for example, in terms of genetics or relativity or poverty—which are only directly observable as phenomenal forms or surface manifestations of reality. Among the obstacles in Pathways are myriad difficulties of college-level reading, writing, and research, the unsettling knowledge these encounters reveal, and the implications of that knowledge for us as historically situated beings in the struggle for meaning. Here, I theorize why some students overcome these obstacles to grasp threshold concepts and others do not.

For those who do cross the thresholds of critical reading, writing, and inquiry, the Pathways curriculum is transformative in part, I believe, because it resists the logic of the contemporary neoliberal university that interpellates students as consumers and customers rather than learners. In his influential essay, “Inventing the University,” David Bartholomae writes, “[I]t is in the nature of a liberal arts education that a student, after the first year or two, must learn to try on a variety of voices and interpretive schemes” (4; emphasis added). Despite its shortcomings, to which I return, Bartholomae’s university has renewed meaning today as we witness the devastating impact on higher education of neoliberal policies of austerity,
deregulation, privatization, and marketization manifested in budget cuts, student debt, adjunctification, and threats to tenure and academic freedom.

**The Origin of Pathways**

The idea for Pathways arose in 2011 at a summer institute sponsored by the Brooklyn Historical Society for Students and Faculty in the Archives (SAFA), a three-year project funded by a US Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education grant to introduce first-year college students from three local colleges to historical archives. While history museums like BHS have long supported K–12 education, they have paid less attention to postsecondary instruction (see Roff). Similarly, scholars engaged in archival research have tended to focus on their own projects or involve graduate students or upper division undergraduate majors. SAFA’s explicit goals were to enhance first-year students’ critical thinking, research, and literacy skills, including close reading, summary, and contextualization of primary documents; encourage faculty to integrate archival study into their teaching; improve student retention and academic success; and build a collaborative network among participating colleges. BHS was particularly interested in developing approaches and resources for underprepared students from each of the participating, diverse, urban campuses.

My Pathways colleagues—a historian and two other composition instructors—and I were riveted by collections on slavery and the twentieth-century civil rights movement in Brooklyn. The more we learned the more excited we became about the possibilities of acquainting students with archives about history situated in the same streets they walk today—such as Vanderbilt, Lefferts, and Lott—named for Dutch slave-holding families. As participants in both SAFA and LIU Brooklyn’s new Learning Community Program, we developed a two-semester, linked curriculum utilizing BHS collections on slavery and the Brooklyn Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). In the composition class, we traced African American history in Brooklyn, starting with the transatlantic slave trade and concentrating on the Declaration of Independence and the 1799 New York State Gradual Manumission Act; the following spring, in a required interdisciplinary core seminar on the “idea of the human,” the focus shifted to the rise of Jim Crow, the Great Migration, and the civil rights movement.

While the history professor gave students a global perspective on exploration, conquest, colonialism, and slavery in the Americas, the com-
position class concentrated on research and rhetorical analysis of local manifestations of freedom and oppression, enslavement and resistance, reading primary sources together with archival slave bills of sale and indentures in the fall and 1960s artifacts from the Arnie Goldwag Brooklyn CORE collection in the spring together with Frederick Douglass’s fiery “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” speech and Richard Wright’s chronicle of the Great Migration, 12 Million Black Voices. Each semester culminated in a scaffolded research paper utilizing Lloyd Bitzer’s theory of situated rhetoric and built out from a close reading of a specific primary source in relation to its historical context. In the spring, students conducted oral history interviews with local civil rights activists, contributing to a mobile application funded in 2012 by a National Endowment for the Humanities Digital Humanities Startup Grant. I will return to specific elements of the curriculum—archival research, oral history, the digital archive, deep, integrative learning, and interdisciplinary collaboration—after recounting the project’s inspiration and rationale and situating it institutionally.

Inventing the University in the Twenty-First Century

Safeguarding the University: A Defense of Liberal Education

Key to the task Bartholomae set for college students of “inventing the university” is his epigraph from Foucault’s “The Discourse on Language”: “Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it” (4). Although signs of the bureaucratization and global corporatization of education were evident thirty years ago, the discourse on the social function of the university had yet to shift so visibly from Bartholomae’s assumption of the centrality of the liberal arts in higher education to a blatantly instrumental perspective on schooling for the masses. This perspective was perhaps nowhere better displayed than by Wisconsin governor Scott Walker’s attempt to change the state university’s mission statement in 2015 by replacing the language of “public service” and “search for truth” with a call “to meet the state’s workforce needs.” In an era so profoundly marked by the deprofessionalization of the professoriate and the commercialization of higher education, Bartholomae’s argument that students need “to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse” and “learn to speak our language” seems almost quaint (“Inventing” 4–5; emphasis added).
As Bill Readings noted in 1996, “the wider social role of the University as an institution is now up for grabs” (2). The act of “inventing the university” as Bartholomae imagined it in 1986—and even a decade later when Readings published The University in Ruins—is far more daunting today in our market-driven, neoliberal economy. In an interview with John Schilb on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of “Inventing the University,” Bartholomae continued to emphasize close reading “with a difference” (272)—not New Criticism but attention to language as “a struggle for verbal consciousness” (Poirier, qtd. in Bartholomae and Schilb 270). This struggle has been all but eliminated from the college curriculum envisioned by politicians like Walker and many top-level administrators. Architects of the corporate university would like to jettison the humanities altogether and prepare students for a service-driven workforce that, as Readings observed two decades ago, is increasingly attenuated in the twenty-first century as labor unions weaken and manufacturing and technology jobs are outsourced by the transnational capitalist class, creating a new precariat, wreaking economic havoc here and abroad, and intensifying the crisis of neoliberalism.

Like Bartholomae’s university of invention, Pathways to Freedom reflects a deep commitment to the critical capacities of the humanities and thus defies the logic of corporatism by attempting to provide students with the tools of close reading, skepticism, and critique at the core of liberal education. Pathways students encounter topics suffused with local and global urgency, rooted in history, and rife with conflict and struggle. They are asked to comprehend and contribute to history-in-the-making by studying the past and engaging in research, adding their writing, their voices, their interviews with civil rights activists to the historical record. To enter this conversation, they must acquire critical literacy—the ability to stand outside a discourse and criticize it—learning how to think self-reflexively about the dominant discourses shaping their consciousness. Like the curriculum Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky popularized in Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts, we emphasize close reading and analytical writing that challenge students to enter Burkean conversations. As with the Pitt curriculum on adolescence
in which students read Angelou, Salinger, Meade, and Rodriguez, among others, to develop their own theories of growth, Pathways students study Brooklyn history and “invent the university” through scaffolded research, authorizing them to define their own projects, ask their own questions, and subject history’s exclusions, silences, and contradictions to critical rhetorical analysis.

**Transforming the University: A Marxist Critical Pedagogy**

In his 2011 reconsideration of “Inventing the University,” Bartholomae comments that Patricia Bizzell “was exactly right about the absence of Marx in our thinking and writing” (279). I take up this thread of the importance of Marxist theory with respect to critical thinking for its capacity to explain phenomena, surface manifestations of reality that both mystify social relations and, to paraphrase Marx, alienate learners in the products of their learning. On the question of estranged labor, Marx writes:

> The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien. (*Economic*)

While the alienation of the learner is different from that of the worker engaged in a process of commodity production, the learner may experience a similar estrangement from learning when it “becomes an object, an external existence . . . [that] exists outside him . . . as something alien to him,” and exams, reading and writing assignments, grades, and transcripts “confront[s] him as something hostile and alien.” This estrangement is caused in part by the infiltration of exchange value into every facet of social life, including the increasingly flagrant marketization of education; but it is also phenomenological, a question that Villacañas de Castro takes up in his theorization of the “pedagogy of the *Erscheinungsformen*” (“Critique” 110).

According to Villacañas de Castro, the “epistemological obstacles” to learning are created by what Marx called *Erscheinungsformen*, or “phenomenal forms,” situated in the major “Copernican turns” in how we see ourselves in relation to the natural habitat (Darwin’s theory of evolution), biology (Mendel’s genetics), the mode of production (Marxist economics), the psychic apparatus (Freud’s psychoanalytic framework), and the universe
(Einstein's theory of relativity). He explains that each discovery "revealed that human beings were neither independent nor separate from the realities which they studied, but were inscribed in them" (*Critical* 2). Further, they "focused on the objective quality of dimensions to which the human being had normally attributed a subjective character" (2). Each pierces the surface phenomena to arrive at objective reality that cannot be directly observed but must be discovered through mathematical, historical, psychological, or physical evidence and analysis.

Pedagogically, Villacañas de Castro builds on Lev Vygotsky's theory of education, arguing that Paulo Freire's idea of critical consciousness "integrated precisely what Vygotsky left out" ("Critique" 110). He argues that Vygotsky's application of Marx's theory of dialectical materialism omits a key aspect of the phenomenal forms and so fails to explain the obstacles to learning caused by our subjectivity—the trauma of losing the "privileged position that humans had presumed to hold" (*Critical* 3). In particular, Villacañas de Castro argues that social classes and divisions condition social interactions, the use of tools and symbols, and, thus, our ability to comprehend the phenomena of which we are a part. As Freire insists, the learner must exercise his or her own agency in the struggle to shift perspectives and understand objective realities in which he or she is embedded. In Freirean pedagogy, such knowledge cannot be unilaterally transmitted but rather must be attained through participation in a dialogic process of exploration and inquiry. Following Freire, Villacañas de Castro argues that critical pedagogy is best realized in practice through the use of participatory action research in which "students [are] included as full researchers alongside educators" (*Critical* 16).

We ask Pathways students to wrestle with the underlying causes of slavery and Jim Crow in ways most have not previously considered. To develop a critique of slavery as not only unjust and immoral but also fundamental to the development of the nation state, they must grasp basic concepts of political economy that call into question the dominant ideology they have absorbed all their lives. This reconceptualization of history requires a shift in perspective that Pathways students may resist for various reasons. First, it challenges mainstream beliefs about American democracy and raises vexing questions about race, racism, and identity, including their own identities from which they must sufficiently distance themselves to understand the object of study; second, it pushes them to develop critical
analytical capacities by reading and writing texts that many find difficult or irrelevant to increasingly career-driven goals. For example, at the beginning of the semester, which focuses on European conquest and the transatlantic slave trade, students read excerpts from Marcus Rediker’s powerful exposition of the slave ship and learn that this variant of the European sailing ship was the historic vessel for the emergence of capitalism, a new and unprecedented social and economic system that remade large parts of the world beginning in the late sixteenth century. It was also the material setting, the stage, for the enactment of the high human drama of the slave trade. (41)

They may question the study of history in a writing class, the implicit critique of capitalism, the difficulties of the text, or all three. Yet, as they examine concepts like oppression, not only in abstract terms but also in specific manifestations that reveal structural forces and relations of production, they begin to see how “reading” and “writing” history unveils otherwise mystifying social problems like class oppression, racism, and other forms of subjugation. Conversely, they begin reading and writing more critically as they acquire a new discourse that challenges the provincialism they may encounter in other discourse communities and works to subvert racist, nationalist, and unscientific ideologies that mystify reality.

From Rediker’s anatomization of the slave ship as “war machine, mobile prison, and factory,” students learn that “[i]n producing workers for the plantation, the ship-factory also produced ‘race’” (10). They go on to read historian Craig Wilder’s explanation of racism as “a fluid ideology that expresses the realities of power” rather than a cause per se of inequality (3). It is this discovery of how sociohistorical processes and stages of socioeconomic development explain naturalized verities like “race” that fosters critical consciousness, a way of thinking about reality made possible by Marxist dialectics—a “comprehension and affirmative recognition of the existing state of things” that simultaneously includes “the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking up” (Capital).

In terms, then, of rigor and the capacities of first-year students, we subscribe to Bartholomae’s respect for student writing that rehearses what more advanced scholars routinely do. We want to instill a curiosity in our students that leads them to explore the world through texts, from archival artifacts to scholarly articles and newspapers, and contexts that foster appreciation of traditions and forms of knowledge as they participate in
its critique and (re)generation. Both research and reading have been contested areas of composition, with vigorous arguments mounted in 1982 by Richard L. Larson, who asserts that research in writing courses is a form of “non-writing”; in 1992 by Maxine Hairston, who says “that writing courses . . . should not be for anything or about anything other than writing itself” (179); and in 1995 by Peter Elbow, in his debate with Bartholomae about academic writing in which he invites students “to write as though they are a central speaker at the center of the universe—rather than feeling, as they often do, that they must summarize what others have said and only make modest rejoinders from the edge of the conversation to all the smart thoughts that have already been written” (80).

In refuting Elbow’s claim, Bartholomae argued, “Thinking of writing as academic writing makes us think of the page as crowded with others” (“Writing” 63–64). Pathways students must contend with those other voices or fail altogether to enter the conversation. They must learn—as they are in college to do, after all—historical facts, terminology, and critical rhetorical reading skills; thus, they must do exactly the opposite of what Elbow suggests. Our goal is depth of exploration of a topic contextualized through close reading, discussion, field trips, and archival study. This emphasis on depth is part of learning community philosophy, which encourages penetrating, integrative approaches to education that can shift perspectives from subjective to objective engagement with reality, quite literally the opposite of seeing oneself at the center of the universe, and, I would argue, a condition of critical writing, reading, and research. In tension with the traditional aim of breadth in survey courses and the default to surface knowledge in composition’s “generic research paper” that Larson assailed as “not defensible” (812), depth allows students to interact with concrete, specific texts, events, and discourses rather than reams of superficial information—in other words, with Freirean-style inquiry rather than passive recapitulation of predigested facts.

But depth can only be experienced through the learner’s own process of discovery, an insight undergirding theories of participatory action research (PAR) (see, e.g., Cammarota). In response to resistance to the rigors of the Pathways curriculum, we are developing PAR strategies by engaging students in fieldwork and more fully integrating digital methods into the curriculum. By collaborating with students beyond classroom walls, we aim to enable them to research to learn rather than simply go through the
motions of assembling generic research papers. To assist them across these learning thresholds, we try to enact a critical, dialogic pedagogy along the lines of Bartholomae and Petrosky’s invocation in *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts* of a reading and writing course that “cannot begin by telling students what to say [and] must provide a method to enable students to see what they have said” (7). This approach of asking students in core courses to engage in rigorous research, reading, and writing to “see what they have said” and “invent the university” can be transformative; it is also increasingly difficult and necessary in a period of corporate assaults on higher education.

**The Elements of Pathways**

*From the Archives to the Street: An Evolving Curriculum*

Since SAFA began in 2011, we have taught more than 250 students, involving them in research using artifacts from the BHS archives and the Pathways mobile application, oral history interviews, and scholarly articles they learn to access in online library databases. We have benefited from Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg’s *Negotiating Difference: Cultural Case Studies for Composition*, an innovative, out-of-print composition textbook with a smart focus on six “contact zones” in American history, including Puritans and Native Americans, the debate over slavery, and the sphere of nineteenth-century women, represented in an assortment of primary texts with diverse perspectives and an apparatus that sends students beyond the anthology to do further research. Pathways students also learn to utilize and distinguish between primary and secondary sources in juxtaposition to unique, undigitized BHS archival artifacts.

This scaffolding fosters a recursive process in which students gain knowledge through course texts and class discussions that inform visits to the archives and suggest questions for further research in the library, oral history interviews, and streets where traces of old Brooklyn—street names, historic houses, and reconstructed neighborhoods like the free black community Weeksville—become visible now that they know where to look. We assign three theoretical texts, including Mary Louise Pratt’s
“Arts of the Contact Zone,” in which she argues that “the literate arts of the contact zone” develop in response to “colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths” that are still unfolding today (34). The other two conceptual prongs of Pathways are freedom as an “essentially contested idea” (Foner 9) and “situated rhetoric” (Bitzer 1).

In the first semester, we discuss Bitzer’s theory of rhetorical exigency and examine the situations that gave rise to the 1799 New York State Gradual Manumission Act in light of the Declaration of Independence. We ask students to situate slave bills of sale and indentures from BHS archives in historical context and reflect on how they complicate ideas of freedom and equality that suffuse the country’s founding document. In the spring, they research a social movement, organization, or tactic related to the civil rights movement, such as Brooklyn CORE campaigns, the role of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or the significance of freedom songs in movement building. We ask them to locate primary documents—speeches, pamphlets, essays, news clips—to anchor their analysis and answer their own percolating questions about their subject’s historical and rhetorical contexts. It is through this repetition of close reading, summary and analysis of primary documents, and rhetorical questions of provenance, context, speaker, audience, purpose, delivery, and reception in dialogue with librarians and us that the students learn to narrow the scope of their topics, make and support claims with evidence, and consider multiple, conflicting points of view.

By puzzling over pre-1799 slave bills of sale and post-1799 indentures, the students exercise critical reading skills to grasp the documents’ archaic language and larger meanings. Chilled as they parse each word and realize that the bill of sale is for a human being, most likely the only record of that person’s existence, students are motivated to search the library’s databases for additional sources to see what more they can surmise. At its best, this approach results in a genuine process of inquiry and discovery rather than a rehash of unassimilated texts or students’ own presuppositions—the “generic research paper” that Larson understandably disdained. As one student mused after visiting BHS on her own to conduct research on Bedford Stuyvesant, “We became detectives this year, searching for evidence to support claims about Brooklyn history. We were introduced to using online databases, archival research, and some oral history. We discovered things about Brooklyn we never imagined.” By going from local archives to the
very streets named in slave bills or 1960s court records, students enact a version of participatory action research rooted in place-based “participatory citizenship” (Brooke 1).

Aware of centuries-old aspects of Brooklyn’s history, students visit and revisit these streets as researchers, as well as city dwellers, able to resee them in light of historical figures of power and authority and narratives of resistance, struggle, and protest learned about in Pathways. As John Ackerman suggests, “to write as a sociogeographic practice is more of an act of inscription than of composing, more of a mark upon the ground, in a public sphere, and in a material history” (113). At best, Pathways students begin to inscribe history as they read and research marks on the same ground they tread by people such as William J. Wilson, a black educator in Brooklyn’s first African school, renamed Colored School #1 in 1845, and national correspondent under the pen name “Ethiop” for the Frederick Douglass’ Paper, or Brooklyn CORE activist Rioghan Kirchner, a “white tester” in a citywide campaign against housing discrimination in the early 1960s.

The Allure of the Historical Society: Teaching with Physical Archives

The physical archive possesses a powerful allure as a repository of irreplaceable yet often everyday traces of the past. As Carolyn Steedman puts it, the archivist is fevered by the “dust of the archives” in all its fragmentary bits of human existence, including the actual dust of parchment, animal skins, and the other “filthy trades” that “by circuitous routes, deposited their end-products in the archives” (27). A puzzle of public, private, official, missing, often random pieces, the archive contains not only “selected and consciously chosen documentation from the past” but also “the mad fragments that no one intended to preserve and that just ended up there” (Steedman 68). Describing Jules Michelet’s intense experience in the Archives Nationales in Paris, Steedman calls the archive a “place of dreams” that brings “life to those who do not for the main part exist, not even between the lines of state papers and legal documents, who are not really present, not even in...
the records of Revolutionary bodies and fractions” (70). For us, the archive at the Brooklyn Historical Society was the locus of Pathways’ creation.

In 1881, the Brooklyn Historical Society, founded in 1863, moved to Brooklyn Heights into a Queen Ann–style building with a terracotta facade adorned with busts of heroic, male emblems of Western cultural power—Columbus, Franklin, Shakespeare, Gutenberg, Beethoven, and Michelangelo. The Othmer Library on the second floor, with its carved columns and arched stained glass windows, holds the most comprehensive collection of Brooklyn cultural and historical materials in the world. On the third floor landing above the library sits a modern medallion by Meredith Bergmann entitled Historia Testis Temporum, a commentary on the building’s white male image commissioned in 2010 to honor “Pinky,” a.k.a. Sally Maria Diggs, a young, mulatto slave “sold” into freedom at a mock auction performed by Reverend Henry Ward Beecher at nearby Plymouth Church.

Even before SAFA introduced us to Brooklyn’s extensive early reliance on slavery, we had begun to imagine a learning community that linked composition and history, focused on the borough, and engaged students in writing and recording local history. Yet it was only during our many hours at BHS that my collaborators and I fully grasped the pedagogical potential of the archives through our examination of slave bills of sale, runaway slave ads, and numerous accounts of Pinky, whose auction occurred only a few blocks away at Plymouth Church, where the statue of her and Beecher still stands. We had caught Steedman’s archive fever, a phrase she borrows ironically from Derrida, explaining its epidemiological implications for the archive as a medical hazard as well as a place of desire. The particular moment of onset came for us as we were scouring folders of slave bills, noting their provenance, details, and dates, and one of us suddenly whispered that we were busily jotting the names in our notebooks of individuals who had been bought and sold, whereupon we stared at each other and shuddered, experiencing the “shocking, sudden seeing of something” in those faded papers of record (Steedman 70).

Pathways students visit BHS in the fall to examine slave bills of sale.
and indentures in their composition class and runaway slave ads in history, a task we assign not with the intent of training archivists but of fostering close reading and critical analysis skills and, less tangibly, a sense of curiosity and wonder. They pore over preselected artifacts with magnifying glasses, decipher eighteenth-century handwriting with the long s, click cell phone photos, and take notes with pencil as instructed in a review of rules for handling artifacts. These documents encapsulate the tensions between slavery and freedom, inequality and equality, evident in the archives and reinforced by primary texts like Jefferson’s draft of the Declaration of Independence and numerous challenges to it by black writers from Benjamin Banneker to Frederick Douglass that reveal the central contradictions of American history. These contradictions are further revealed by study of the 1799 New York State Gradual Manumission Act, which “freed” enslaved children born after July 4, 1799, yet kept them in servitude until their twenty-fifth or twenty-eighth birthdays for women and men, respectively (Burgos et al.).

For their first paper assignment, we ask students to conduct a rhetorical analysis of the slave bills of sale and indentures in relationship to the 1799 Act and the Declaration of Independence, focusing on the economic, political, and social exigencies that gave rise to the discourses of equality and freedom of the founding fathers and pressured New York legislators to respond to abolitionist and pro-slavery pressures in ways that both contradicted and exacted the promise of democracy. From the study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century anti-slavery movements in relation to the revolutionary ethos and economic foundations of early America, Pathways turns in the spring to the rise of Jim Crow, the Great Migration, and the civil rights movement. At the archives, students study material on lynching in history class and, in Core Seminar, mimeographed fliers, court papers, and news clippings in the Arnie Goldwag Brooklyn CORE collection. They also read articles by historian Brian Purnell, whose research on Brooklyn CORE helped us sift through the BHS collection—thirteen manuscript boxes, five record cartons, and two artifact boxes—to identify specific items about its key campaigns against racial discrimination in housing, employment, municipal service, and education.

In the Goldwag papers, students learn, for example, about apartments in Harlem with “rats as big as cats”; the use of white “testers” like Kirchner to expose racist real estate and banking practices; a protest in Brooklyn’s Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhood, by then predominantly black and low
income, against unequal street cleaning and garbage collection services; campaigns against employment discrimination, including pickets at a popular Brooklyn bakery; and the intensifying fight to desegregate Brooklyn public schools and beaches. In an invited lecture at my campus in 2013, Purnell recalled asking his doctoral adviser how he could go beyond the “first draft of history” about Brooklyn CORE he had discovered in newspaper microfilm archives. Encouraged to contact activist Jitu Weusi, he obtained his first oral history interview and a list of CORE members who would supply him—and later us—with primary source material informing the narrative of his book Fighting Jim Crow in the County of Kings: The Congress of Racial Equality in Brooklyn.

The archive invites us to view the past with a more critical eye, attending to an artifact’s origin and scrutinizing traces of history to discern patterns, solve mysteries, and discover stories, “hidden history,” as Sandra Roff calls them, “treasures” (551). Claiming the archive for composition studies, Susan Wells names three gifts: “resistance to our first thought, freedom from resentment, and the possibility of reconfiguring our relation to history” (58). For Pathways students engaged in active, tactile learning in an archival library, these gifts ideally take the form of precluding quick or fixed answers; affording some freedom from the constrictions of the institutional classroom; and offering them the possibility of reconfiguring their own relation to history as active researchers rather than passive recipients of historical knowledge. Moreover, as Wendy Hayden observes, “[A]sking students to undertake the difficult task of archival research invites them into the scholarly community, where they have much to contribute” (418).

As often noted, the archive contains gaps, silences, and competing historical narratives replete with exclusions—“what is not catalogued . . . the returned call slip[s] . . . [that] tell of the gentry and not of the poor stockinger” (Steedman 68). Mostly absent from the pre-twentieth-century collected papers of Brooklyn’s founding Dutch families, municipal and administrative records, maps, and other ephemera are the voices of enslaved and free blacks, whose only individual proof of existence is typically a bill of sale, a runaway slave ad, or an entry in a farmer’s diary. By attending to these omissions, students begin to hear the voices of the dispossessed “speak” through the centuries, just as Michelet exhuming the dead in French archives made audible “the whispers of the souls who had suffered so long ago and who were smothered now in the past” (Steedman 70).
Oral History: Voices of Civil Rights Activists and Pathways Students

Pathways students discover that the legacy of slavery stubbornly persists in the racist attitudes and policies of the Jim Crow North documented in the Arnie Goldwag Brooklyn CORE collection. In developing the Brooklyn Civil Rights Oral History project, inspired by the 1930s New Deal Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), we wanted to create a pedagogical tool to foster participatory action research while seizing an opportunity to record oral histories of 1960s activists nearing the end of their lives. We made plenty of missteps: our students and we felt pressured to cram the interviews into an already packed semester; the quality of the oral history recordings was not always as good as we would have liked; and the metadata could have been more meticulously collected, edited, and preserved. However, had we not pursued our vision of a student-centered research project in the tradition of the FWP, we would have missed the opportunity in 2012 to interview two of our most generous, knowledgeable narrators—Jitu Weusi and Rioghan Kirchner—both of whom died the following year. Moreover, the students, in their late teens and early twenties, elicited a uniquely edifying story from elderly narrators who spoke, it seemed to us, directly to these and future generations of young people, as if providing them with a time capsule of activist instructions.

The students, in their late teens and early twenties, elicited a uniquely edifying story from elderly narrators who spoke, it seemed to us, directly to these and future generations of young people, as if providing them with a time capsule of activist instructions.

With the impetus of the 1930s FWP interviews of more than two thousand ex-slaves—which documented a dying generation, despite shortcomings from lack of equipment and training to problems of racial bias and power dynamics—we felt the momentousness of creating an archive of the voices of students and narrators who together would tell a story closer to our own times, the pulse of which we could still feel on the streets of Brooklyn. With the help of the SAFA codirectors and the BHS oral historian, we developed a set of procedures for acquiring the interviews. Our students already understood the basic purpose and fragmentary nature of archives and could appreciate their role in contributing a “deed of gift” to the community and future researchers. We trained them in basic interviewing skills, distinguishing between an interview to obtain specific information and an oral history inviting a life story yet still with a focus—like ours on civil
rights—that enables the narrator to tell his or her story in its fullness. The SAFA codirectors helped us develop templates for metadata that students completed, including information about themselves, the narrator, date, location, and medium of the interview, a summary of its content, and a list of search terms. To enable the interviewers to ask targeted questions, we supplied brief biographies of the narrators as the basis for further research.

The logistics, especially that first year with sixty students and twelve narrators over a two-month period, were challenging. We had first to identify and locate mostly elderly narrators and arrange their transportation to and from the campus, a time-consuming and complicated process in itself. We had to coordinate recording the oral histories in the campus radio station with a student technician who promised to but did not use WAV format, an uncompressed, high-quality audio file best suited for preservation purposes. All of the interviews had to take place outside class time, and each involved four to six students, at least one instructor, and the narrator. Nevertheless, we recorded twelve oral histories that spring, including interviews with Brooklyn CORE activists Rioghan Kirchner and Yvonne Harmon; Jitu Weusi, who had joined Brooklyn CORE while a college student at LIU Brooklyn and gone on to found the Uhuru Sasa Shule (Freedom Now School) and the East, a cultural organization for people of African descent, and played a leading role in the struggle over community control of schools in Ocean-Hill Brownsville as well as the establishment of the New York Chapter of the Black United Front; Esther Cooper Jackson, active in the Young Communist League (YCL) and the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) in Birmingham, Alabama, in the 1940s and founding editor along with W. E. B. Du Bois of Freedomways; and Dorothy Burnham, a Brooklyn-born professor of biology, civil rights activist, and, like her longtime friend Jackson, active in both YCL and SNYC.

We struggled on multiple fronts as we sought to build the collection and create the NEH-funded mobile app: students submitted the paperwork late or in need of revision, and two of our narrators refused to give consent, one because she was elderly and distrusted the accuracy of her memories and the other because she objected to language in the agreement that gave non-exclusive license to LIU and BHS for the recording. As our students scrambled to finish research papers on the 1960s civil rights movement, we worked frantically to wrap up the oral histories, dismayed to discover that the interviews had not been recorded in WAV format and some were
missing. These failures were among several I could explore further, but for my purposes here let me simply say that implementing Pathways was far from smooth, we made mistakes, and we learned from them. In a discussion of the disciplinary implications of collecting oral histories of underrepresented people, Shannon Carter and James H. Conrad explain the need for transparency and accessibility of artifacts in building and sustaining local community archives. Emphasizing the importance of standards set by historical organizations for preserving research artifacts as well as of federally mandated Institutional Review Board protocols for protecting human subjects, Carter and Conrad conclude nevertheless:

People exist amid a constant flow of competing narratives, places, time constraints, and obligations. We capture what we can, always aware that we can never capture everything; thus, our records are always partial, inadequate interpretations rather than reliable, complete, unbiased, and unfiltered historical records. (98)

This acknowledgment that “we can never capture everything” helped allay our anxiety about our failures, including errors of fact in one narrator’s student-authored biography that infuriated her and the loss of that recording due to technical problems. As bad as our mistakes were—and I do not mean to minimize them—they were part of a larger, bracing effort to create a course of study we previously could not have imagined, whose integrity has depended not on unmitigated success but rather on a spirit of invention that prevailed throughout. To reveal our errors—in addition to their instructive value—is to argue that they are part of a creative process that should be encouraged as both archival research and oral history gain traction across disciplines. Not to minimize ethical obligations or encourage sloppiness but to foster widespread engagement in oral history projects, Alessandro Portelli warns that the outcome of “increasingly complex requirements of professional ethics . . . is to cause activist, volunteer, community researchers, often highly ethically motivated, to feel guilty” (56). He further points out that compliance with bureaucratic procedures “is no guarantee of truly ethical behavior,” yet it risks “drying out some of the most vital strains that have kept oral history alive” (56).

Conducting oral histories with activists about the same historical events students were learning about in BHS collections reinforced their understanding of the archive and the construction of the annals of his-
tory. As Brad Lucas notes, rather than a “banking model” interview that “withdraw[s] data from a subject to be deposited in a research study,” oral history produces a fundamentally dialectical rhetorical dynamic in which interviewer and informant interact “to mutually constitute knowledge” in “a conversational narrative” (30). For Portelli, this relationship is central to “the task and theme of oral history” (viii), reflecting both the distance and the bond between a historian and a narrator’s private recollections in a shared act of coauthorship that transmutes personal memory into public history. Affirming the bottom-up ethos of oral history, Portelli underscores that these practices “started out primarily because we wanted to listen to those who had gone unheard—common folks, workers, the poor and the marginal, women, gays, black people, or colonial subjects” (58).

The Pathways to Freedom Mobile App: Teaching with Digital Archives

Further complicating and expanding Pathways’ oral history project, we created a digital archive of the voices of these 1960s civil rights activists that can be used not only by future cohorts of our students but also by other high school and college classes and the general public, and that can be capable of crowdsourcing, mapping, and preserving additional stories. With a startup grant from the NEH Office of the Digital Humanities for the Pathways to Freedom Digital Narrative and the assistance of a computer science colleague, we developed a mobile application to map the oral histories in time and space, using HTML5, jQuery Mobile, TimelineJS, and Google Maps. If the physical archive still tends to preserve human history from the perspective of the dominant culture for the relative few that set foot in hushed libraries or dusty enclaves sealed off from the rest of the world, the digital archive opens the door to broad public access to digitized artifacts and participation in building and creating online archives. We were interested in pursuing “how archival work enables student participation in scholarly inquiry” and “how digital technologies afford even greater participation by allowing students also to build new online archives” (VanHaitsma 36).

Our app includes a Google Map of protest sites in Brooklyn linked to content such as archival news stories and political fliers; an annotated digital timeline from 1790 to 1965; a gallery of Bob Adelman’s dramatic black-and-white photographs of the 1960s Brooklyn civil rights movement,
audio and video recordings, and metadata (http://beta.brooklynfreedom.org). Based on the oral histories, we produced a short documentary—*We Shall Not Be Moved: Downstate '63*—about a campaign against job discrimination at the central Brooklyn construction site of the SUNY Downstate Medical Center. Led by Brooklyn CORE and an alliance of black ministers, the campaign galvanized the African American community in a militant, three-week protest (https://vimeo.com/72094719). Three of our narrators—Weusi, Kirchner, and Harmon—appear in the film, dedicated to Weusi, along with historian Brian Purnell, whose research joins a wave of new scholarship rewriting the history of slavery, Jim Crow, and the struggle for freedom in the North from a subaltern perspective. Both a Pathways website and the app will eventually link to the film and solicit user feedback—comments, stories, images, reflections—about the civil rights movement in Brooklyn and beyond, then and now.

Based on their experiences with traditional archival collections at the BHS library, Pathways students grasp the significance of digital archives. We see that the SAFA exercises with records of slavery in Brooklyn foster not only information literacy and critical thinking skills but also deeper intellectual understanding of the importance of archives in preservation, rhetorical recovery, and critique of the dominant social classes extensively documented in collections such as the Gertrude Lefferts Vanderbilt papers, 1737–1818. Later in the semester, through the FWP collection of interviews with ex-slaves, students encounter a conscious, if flawed, example of how oral history can be used to reexamine history from the viewpoint of the enslaved.8 Even as we explain the methodological problems of bias and the historical significance of thousands of firsthand accounts of slavery (see Mutnick, “Toward” 133–34), we invite Pathways students to take on the FWP mantle by documenting the 1960s civil rights campaigns, whose ranks are rapidly aging, many already dead, in their own backyard of Brooklyn. By involving students in the creation of this digital archive, we aim to reinforce the information literacy threshold concept that “[i]nformation users and creators are part of an ongoing conversation in which new knowledge builds upon or refutes what has gone before, and in turn inspires new inquiry within a community” (Brunetti et al.)

Going forward, to give more emphasis to participatory action research, we might experiment with a pop-up archive to “facilitate an immediate
By creating a pop-up archive, we could, for example, collect freedom stories from dozens of members of the exceptionally diverse LIU Brooklyn campus community that might best be “seized on the wing.” (de Certeau, qtd. in Rice and Rice 249). This type of participatory action research responds to Liza Potts’s call for “scholar practitioners in rhetoric to engage with the digital humanities as user advocates, experience architects, and participant-centered researchers” (255). At a “freedom stories” booth, Pathways students could record images, artifacts, and short interviews with classmates, faculty, and staff on a campus in which over seventy languages are spoken. Thus we might document this period in the late 2010s of resistance to neoliberal corporatism and the “New Jim Crow,” animated by a new generation of activists and divided by one of the most fraught US presidential elections and results in our history.

The Learning Community
Arguably, it is the generative, collaborative, interdisciplinary ethos of the learning community that allowed the Pathways curriculum to fall into place. Since the inception of Pathways in 2011, my colleagues in composition and history and I have taught one to three cohorts (the history professor teaches all the history classes, and from 2011 to 2013, there were three cohorts and composition instructors). Over the years, we have focused more sharply on facilitating integrative learning, utilizing the archives to teach the research process, and more fully enacting a version of participatory action research as we ask students to use what they learn about history and rhetoric—as well as reading, research, and deliberative discourse—to discover and disseminate new (at least for them and often for us) knowledge.

Two Pathways students in spring 2016 passed through the portal described by Meyer et al. in their theory of threshold concepts as a shift of the learner’s perspective to grasp not only rhetorical-dialectical processes of reading, research, and writing but also historical modes of thinking and analysis in recovering knowledge mostly absent from popular memory. Xhevahire Kraja researched women’s suffrage in Brooklyn, close to home, and found out that Brooklyn-born Lucy Burns together with Alice Paul took
up the mantle of women’s rights from Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the early twentieth century. Xhevahire was able to find archival records of Burns at the Brooklyn Historical Society, which she visited on her own after having been introduced to the Othmer Library earlier that year. She was also able to integrate Stuart Hall’s discussion of difference in “Spectacle of the Other,” explaining:

[In the women’s suffrage movement, women were reduced to stereotypes such as a servant that cleans and cooks for her entire life, which caused women to have a small margin to succeed over men. According to the argument Hall makes, stereotyping has hegemonic power and is a discursive form of power that is circular (263). In the early twentieth century, Burns and Paul were still fighting to turn this stereotype around, and allow women to have the same opportunities as men without being stereotyped.

Similarly, Ama Cobbinah discovered the history of George H. White, a black congressman from North Carolina elected in 1897. After North Carolina disenfranchised black voters in 1901, White became the last black congressman to serve until 1928. Conveying a deep understanding of the rhetorical significance of his farewell address to Congress in 1901, Ama writes:

George H. White is a historical figure who is often overlooked for the impact he made on the history of African Americans. The end of his career as a black congressman symbolized the end of representation of the political rights of black people in the United States. The population of black people in the South struggled for civil rights in the midst of racial discrimination and Jim Crow laws while the Northern population struggled in the presence of subtle forms of discrimination. Between the years of 1901 and 1909 individuals like White and organizations such as the Afro-American Council and the Committee of Twelve took a stance for black people and their principles, which were aimed to secure the political and civil rights of African Americans and were later adopted by the NAACP and the civil rights movement.

I believe that Xhevahire and Ama passed through a portal in the research process with respect not only to their specific subjects but also to the means by which they were able to access, synthesize, and communicate “new” knowledge.
“new” knowledge, a passage that some classmates failed to make at all and that left others in a liminal space of confusion and simulation. When it happens, understanding of and engagement in the dialectic between content and form, product and process, time and space, past and present, enable major shifts in perspective by opening the “gates” to spheres of meaning that Mikhail Bakhtin writes about in his essay on the chronotope. This portal—these gates to the objective realities underlying the phenomenal forms, the observable, surface manifestations of things—is one and the same as that described by Villacañas de Castro as “the pedagogy of the Erscheinungsformen” (“Critique” 110).

The Pathways curriculum has made my colleagues and me more inventive, intentional teachers, and students like Xhevahire and Ama more conscious, critical, knowledgeable, and skilled readers and writers. Together with its specific curricular theme of American struggles for freedom, Pathways contributes perhaps not so much a new or revised theory of composition as a transposition of Bartholomae’s perspective on inventing the university to the twenty-first century in an increasingly savage stage of neoliberal capitalism, one in which Marxist pedagogy can serve as a dialectical tool of discovery and critique by situating us in social, historical, and natural contexts and illuminating the role we all play in the collective struggle to know and shape the world.

The underlying conditions revealed by the brutish 2016 presidential election and its aftermath have long been percolating: the abandonment of working-class interests by an establishment that consistently backs forms of globalization benefiting only the top one percent, the rise of nationalist and neofascist forces worldwide that whip up racist ideologies, and the relegation of a globalizing world of the masses to a Hobbesian existence. These trends, also responsible for leaving the “university in ruins,” were apparent in 2011 when the Pathways learning community was launched and informed our focus on African American struggles for freedom as a lynchpin for engaging students in a critical study of American history. But we could not have predicted the wave of extralegal murders of black people that new technologies—the same that spur globalization—would publicize, awakening a new generation of civil rights activists and heightening the relevance of our curriculum. Nor could we have anticipated Trump’s victory,
much less the racist, xenophobic, misogynistic, white supremacist rhetoric and reality it has unleashed.

In the Trump era, the transposition of the university still imaginable in the 1980s will require a defense of the liberal arts and sciences against increasingly aggressive budget cuts, adjunctification, privatization of public education, similarly driven priorities of private nonprofit institutions, and watered down core requirements abetting ever narrower forms of career-driven, instrumentalist curricula likely in the end to create a massive reserve army of the uneducated and unemployed. The Pathways curriculum resists these forces by raising expectations for student learning and equipping learners with tools for critique that can unlock historical and rhetorical consciousness. Rather than a particular approach to teaching, I hope to have shown a way of thinking about teaching, a willingness to fail as well as succeed that itself is creative, rhetorical, iterative, and dialectical, aimed at uncovering objective realities and engaging in an ongoing process of inquiry and change. I hope additionally at least to have begun to suggest how a rigorous curriculum that fosters critical consciousness can help us defend the liberal arts and sciences in the intensifying battles to come not only over who will define the future of higher education but also what sort of world our students and their children will inhabit.

Acknowledgments
I would like to thank the anonymous CCC reviewers and Jonathan Alexander for their encouragement and guidance throughout the revision process as well as the Brooklyn Historical Society and the NEH Office of the Digital Humanities for supporting various aspects of the Pathways curriculum. I am also grateful to Jan Cohen-Cruz for early feedback and deeply indebted to my colleague Sara Campbell for always being willing to read another draft.

Notes
1. For more information about the LIU Brooklyn Learning Community Program, see Mutnick, “The Right Time.”
2. For a full account of SAFA, including participant biographies, exercises, and
brief articles on each of the courses, see TeachArchives.org.

3. Archival research in composition and rhetoric is rapidly becoming more prevalent, focusing not only on disciplinary history but also on the uses of archives in college writing classes (see, e.g., Wells; Ramsey et al.; Hayden).

4. One of two residential campuses of a multicampus private university, LIU Brooklyn serves a majority of students of color (qualifying us as a Predominantly Black Institution) with a median family income of $45,000.

5. Lost on critics who objected at the time to his emphasis on students’ need to appropriate our academic discourses, Bartholomae’s defense of liberal traditions takes on new meaning in a period that so utterly devalues principles of academic freedom and rigor (see, e.g., Boyd, Ritchie).

6. The essay to which Bartholomae refers is Bizzell’s “Marxist Ideas in Composition Studies.”

7. More recently, composition scholars have begun to reconsider the role of research as driven by inquiry rather than the defense of a settled thesis, a trend in accord with the Pathways curriculum (see, e.g., Downs and Wardle).

8. The online version of the collection in the Library of Congress is entitled Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936–1938.

Works Cited


Bizzell, Patricia. “Marxist Ideas in Composition Studies.” Contending with Words: Composition and Rhetoric in


Wells, Susan. “Claiming the Archive for Rhetoric and Composition.” Rhetoric and Composition as Intellectual Work,
Deborah Mutnick

Deborah Mutnick is professor of English and codirector of LIU Brooklyn Learning Communities. She is author of Writing in an Alien World: Basic Writing and the Struggle for Equality in Higher Education (1996). Her work has appeared in College Composition and Communication, College English, Rhetoric Review, Journal of Basic Writing, Community Literacy Journal, and elsewhere. She is currently working on a project about the enduring relevance of Richard Wright’s life and work.