

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Chapters from NCHC Monographs Series

National Collegiate Honors Council

2021

Committee as Text

Mimi Killinger

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchcmonochap>



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [Higher Education Administration Commons](#), [Liberal Studies Commons](#), and the [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Chapters from NCHC Monographs Series by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Committee as Text

MIMI KILLINGER
UNIVERSITY OF MAINE

I mistakenly joined the Place as Text (PAT) Committee in 2017. Perusing a list of prospective standing committees to join on the NCHC website, I had clicked on “Semesters Committee” (now “Place as Text”), having seen NCHC flyers advertising their adventurous institutes, which sounded fascinating though I had never attended one myself. Shortly thereafter I received an invitation to the committee’s June working meeting in Brooklyn that likewise sounded promising. Had I been well versed in the City as Text™ (CAT) pedagogy that undergirds PAT, I might have then done some reading, finding out more about the group and perhaps recognizing that prior attendance at one of their Faculty Institutes had historically been recommended for membership on the committee.

Immersion would instead be the first CAT principle that I experienced, finding my way to Brooklyn and the recommended lodging—a hipster Even Hotel off of bustling Flatbush Avenue. I had only to walk catty-corner across Flatbush Avenue to LIU Brooklyn for our scheduled meeting. The campus proved challenging to navigate, however, prompting me to chat with several locals who directed me to an inner courtyard that provided access to our assigned building. After a flight of stairs and some back-and-forth

down hallways, I found our designated corner room with eight or so congenial committee members seated around a conference table. They had wondered about my RSVP “yes” to the meeting but were open—as CAT had trained them to be—to a bewildered new member.

Co-chairs Sara E. Quay and Alix Dowling Fink proved particularly amiable, capable, and in sync, modeling that CAT pedagogy engenders formidable leadership qualities. I inferred a recent change in leadership on the committee as the seasoned outgoing chair, Bernice Braid, amplified and informed our discussions throughout. I took exhaustive notes during opening conversations, jotting down CAT tenets such as “Look for contradictions, see things differently”; “Exploration, not tourism”; “See different things at the same spot”; “Become aware of your attitude toward a place”; and “Engage in experimental pedagogy through organic field exploration and self-reflective writing.” Thus began my immersion into CAT ways of learning and being—explaining a great deal, including why directions into the campus had not been clearer. This group liked to see what happens when one is a little lost.

The *interdisciplinarity* of CAT pedagogy, and of the committee itself, likewise became apparent through our discussions. Sara and Alix’s agenda for the three-day meeting provided ample space between bullet points for reflection on past experiences and for visions of institutes to come. We heard about last summer’s Rotterdam Faculty Institute, a Grand Canyon Semester in the fall, a Southern Civil Rights Faculty Institute in March, and a CAT master class at the most recent NCHC conference in Seattle. In the “project pipeline” for upcoming institutes were “Preservation, Progress, and Politics in Charleston, South Carolina,” “Negotiating Empire and Identity in Istanbul,” “Ideals and Practicalities: Narratives of Stewardship in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem,” and “Negotiating Belonging: Crossroads, Borders, and Communities in Barcelona.”

Also up for discussion were CAT programs in Hiroshima, Switzerland, Belize, Cuba, Portland (Maine), and Atlanta, the site of the next NCHC conference. It occurred to me as we discussed the intriguing list that the pedagogy remains constant while the places govern what is learned; in CAT, the multiple disciplines of study are determined by the cities. Furthermore, committee members around

the table brought unique interests and expertise to site selection. Historian and classicist Sal Musumeci had a scholarly passion for food and became a natural choice for co-leading a 2019 CAT Master Class in New Orleans, given the city's unique and varied cuisine. Another historian, Leslie Heaphy, had a primary research interest in baseball—especially the New York Mets—and proposed a Faculty Institute in Cooperstown, home of the National Baseball Hall of Fame. Kathy Lyon, a professor of psychology with a bachelor's degree in studio art and an artist husband, would help facilitate the institute in Barcelona, a city known for its modernist art and architecture. Interdisciplinarity for CAT was rooted both in urban characteristics and in human intellectual curiosity, the heartfelt kind.

Finally, two particular experiences over the course of this working meeting illuminated for me what *integrative learning* means in the context of CAT. The first experience was a reunion breakfast led by alumni from a 1987 Semester housed at LIU Brooklyn, for which Bernice had been a primary instructor and facilitator. The former students and their Semester faculty said the Semester had taught them “to discover,” to have a broad map that they filled in for themselves. Bernice described the 1987 Semester as “designed to create as much stress as we could,” a “hot house” for students and faculty alike. The students claimed they learned “what they had always wanted to,” approaching the city with “unstinting honesty” that revealed “pressures, contradictions . . . the texture of life for people who lived there.” They wrote “on their feet” and lived “wide awake.” “It was chaos and really structured,” agreed the alumni, as they recalled lessons such as “Get out onto the street and bring it back into the classroom” or “Your words should have the feeling of you about them.” Their reflections portrayed CAT as a laboratory, as an integrative space that demands we come to know what really matters out there. These thoughts were echoed by the faculty in describing their own experiences in the project.

The second experience in integrative learning was our collective Friday-evening walkabout down Fulton Street into the core of Brooklyn Heights. It was fascinating to watch the ease with which committee members moved through new urban terrain. Bernice led the way while her followers took in the modest elements of Fulton

Street and then the shadowy grandeur of Pierrepont Street, a half block from the Brooklyn Heights Promenade and lined in nineteenth-century brownstones, one of which was Bernice's. Before entering her brownstone, the group listened to squeals from a nearby playground and felt the cadence of the Promenade leading north to piers that had been converted into parks and a roller rink that juts out into the East River.

Steps were a distinctive feature of Bernice's brownstone—steps up to the arched exterior doorway, steps up to her second-floor apartment, steps from the living area up to the kitchen, steps from the kitchen up to the rooftop with a panoramic view of the Statue of Liberty. Again, the committee settled into the experience, notably aware and at ease. On the rooftop, Richard Badenhausen, a T. S. Eliot scholar with a Western mountain orientation, looked down onto Pierrepont Street from the roof's edge, despite the absence of a railing; the risky vantage point afforded him a different brownstone perspective. Back in their living room, Bernice's husband, Paul, passed a tray with glasses of blush and white wine he had dexterously carried down the kitchen stairs. The group enjoyed both the wine and the opportunity for integration into the upstairs/downstairs texture of life in Bernice's brownstone.

I sense that the Place as Text Committee's work together has developed habits in committee members that denote highly developed sensitivities. The group demonstrates a keen awareness of context, a visceral understanding of how places impact lives in enduring ways. CAT lessons in *immersion*, *interdisciplinarity*, and *integrative learning* have shown committee members the benefits of hot houses, of becoming a little lost, of acknowledging the lenses that shape who we are. Their intense focus on relationship to place informs the organizational work of the committee while also shaping their individual connections to cities and to others. I look forward to my first CAT institute, to participating in an experiential learning adventure that will change me, too.

Address correspondence to Mimi Killinger at
margaret.killinger@Maine.edu.