

Useless but Vital: Teaching the Humanities in a Time of Crisis

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Let me begin with a line and take it for a walk, to recall a memorable phrase from the modern artist Paul Klee. Borrowing from a simple experiment from the anthropologist Tim Ingold (148), may I request you to take a sheet of plain paper and a pencil or ballpen, and draw a rough circle. What do we see? We respond to this question in several possible ways. Some of us might focus on the quality of the shape we just drew – not perfect, almost perfect, others will probably take note of the quality of the line – stable, tentative, thick, thin, to name a few. Still, others will most likely call attention to the relationship of figure and ground - that of a circle against a blank empty background. In other words, our description will focus on the outcome, rather than the process, or more specifically – the gesture of the hand that held the pencil, which alighted on the paper, took a turn around its surface, and left a trail. If we view this trail in terms of its outcome, we might be inclined, as I have just demonstrated, to interpret the circle, not as a trajectory of movement, but as a static perimeter, a totality, ready-drawn on the otherwise empty page. It is as though we left a mark on the blank surface of the land, built a fence around it, occupied it and called it a “place.” In both paper and land, “the pathways or trails *along* which movement proceeds are perceived as limits *within* which it is contained” (148).

Let us return to our pens and papers, and draw a dotted line. To do this, as Ingold instructs, “you have to bring the tip of your pencil into contact with the paper at a predetermined point, and then cause it to perform a little pirouette on that point so as to form a dot” (150). Since all the movement is concentrated on the dots, and whatever movement we might make between drawing each dot serve merely to carry the pencil tip from point to point, the line is not generated

by movement or trace of movement, but as a point to point connector, similar to those we see in maps that link one destination to another. These, according to Ingold, are the lines of transport, in which passengers are encased in vessels that move across a fluid, trackless surface, their destinations already pre-determined even before they set sail. The passengers do not move; rather they are moved, passengers of their own bodies, bound to the vehicles' perimeters of containment. Movement transpires between different points, as we move from one dot to the next, or from one place to the next, across any span between points of the globe, aided by technologies that will enable us to efficiently reach our destinations.

Whatever movements you might make between drawing each dot serve merely to carry the pencil tip from one point to the next, and are entirely incidental to the line itself. During these intervals, the pencil is inactive, out of use. Indeed, you could even rest it on your desk for any length of time before picking it up again and returning it to the paper surface" (150). The dotted line, in short, is defined not by a gesture but as a connected sequence of fixed points that link one destination to another.

Let us leave the dotted line for a moment and take our pencils again, but this time, draw a continuous freehand line, probably the closest thing to clearing a path.² Let us trace one such line, and another and another, each line getting caught up with one another, converging in several tightly knit knots, that together form a meshwork delineated by movement, beyond it, where the trails get caught up with other lines, like threads weaving and woven together. Ingold rightly contends that this meshwork forms the very fabric of lives. He uses the term "wayfaring" to describe the way we inhabit the earth, with our lives unfolding along paths, on which we leave trails which become entwined with that of other wayfarers we meet along the way. Rather than static places, we think of paths as sites of encounter, as flows of movements and relationality, where people sensuously weave themselves and their environment together, changing both along the way.

This concept of wayfaring frames the many stories I will hope to tell in this paper. One story centers on the birth pains related to the way we teach in the context of the ongoing health crisis that has reconfigured our daily lives, and brought those often taken for granted acts like breathing, smelling and tasting into stark and fraught relief. When the University of the Philippines System shifted wholesale into remote learning during the academic year 2020-2021, we – faculty members of the Department of Art Studies (DAS) – reflected on the tasks ahead with a persistent feeling of *bagabag*, a term that one of our young faculty used during one of our brown bag sessions (our term for faculty colloquia), to describe what can be inadequately translated into English as anxiety, a gut feel that something is not right somewhere, but that we have to start from that somewhere, even if we are reluctant to do so. That "somewhere" comes in the form of a syllabus, which in the days of face-to-face learning, functioned more as a pathway that can lead to somewhere or something else, like a meandering freehand line. In its pandemic incarnation, the syllabus evolved into a creature called the "course pack," which signified the University's continued commitment to fulfill its role as the country's National University, and "its multiple mandates as lead university in setting academic standards and initiating innovations in teaching, research and faculty development; as graduate university; as research university; as public service university; and as regional and global university" (*UP Academic and Student Affairs Roadmaps 2*).

The course pack was envisioned as a way by which we can guide students to get through the learning process from our respective places of confinement. Depending on the students' access to internet and gadgets, or lack of it, these course packs should reach the learners (via courier, email or the Learning Management Systems of our choice) as prepackaged, stand-alone learning materials, composed of detailed course guides, learning resources with study guides, and assignments with activity

guides. Following the lines of transport, we were expected to set sail with a clearly defined itinerary from one point to the next (modules, lesson plans), a well-planned map outlining points of departure (learning outcomes, requirements, rubrics), on one hand, and points of arrival (completion of the course, grades), on the other. We were expected to devise finely-tuned instruments that will ensure the efficient delivery of knowledge, so much so that by the end of the course – as we preface our list of learning outcomes – learners can move to another destination, in accordance with their respective academic timetables.

On one hand, the course pack appears to be the most methodical way to ease students into the remote learning environment; on the other hand, there is a strong undercurrent of resistance to the idea of transport-driven outcomes – a resistance that is aligned with conceiving the world of learning not as “smooth surface upon which knowledge can be mapped, transmitted and then moved around.” (Plumb286). Rather, as wayfaring educators, we view “our learners as beings in motion constantly engaged in a process of enskillment that tunes their bodies and minds (surfaces in their own right) to the ever-transforming surfaces of the world” (Plumb 286). Learning is a process of growth in a world where processes are already going on, and with which we join forces, as we add our own impetus to forces and energies already at play (Ingold 20-21).

From this line of thought arises another source of *bagabag*: the gap between knowledge and grading practices – a conundrum that is very much tied up with this tension between outcome (in the logic of transport) and process (in the logic of wayfaring). What, for example, are our indicators of assessment, specific to the discipline? Is it "capture" following the logic of transport (comprehension, or knowledge gained, for example) or "release," following the pathways of wayfaring – beyond learning outcomes and expectations, to the odd, messy and unexpected, with stress on the process and pleasure or "frisson"¹ of learning and interaction, rather than comfortable, transport-directed certainties?

In practice and as we went through the process of crafting our course packs, we realized that these seemingly opposite paradigms are not mutually exclusive. Because they exist side by side, we oscillate between the two, and as I have demonstrated, these paradigms may even intersect at certain points in the formal education environment. The tension is a productive one, however, as it keeps us on our toes and leads us out of our zones of comfort, as we continuously engage in self-reflection and self-critique, even as we comply with institutional requirements and contingencies. How does this tension operate in our classrooms? In what follows I present our experiences on teaching two courses to demonstrate how our lines of inquiry are shaped, although not wholly determined, by - at the time of writing this essay - the ongoing and in fact, escalating COVID-19 pandemic, at least here in the Philippines.

Why We Teach

I start by quoting a passage from a lecture by Dr. Flora Elena Mirano entitled "Why I Teach," delivered as part of the DAS Professors Emeritae Lecture Series held in 2018 to mark the 60th anniversary of the Department.

“In and out of these rooms, I tried to guide young people out of their safety zones and engage in asking questions of themselves. I baited them. I wove webs of words that trapped them into thinking. I sometimes exasperated them. I did not answer their questions and I asked other questions in response. I tried to create a safe space where they can talk to each other, reassured that they would not be cut down by my authoritative voice. I took them out of the classroom to listen and to look at the world and hopefully, to hear and see what it was they were listening to and looking at” (20).

The passage may be personal, arising from Dr. Mirano's specific experience in the course of her many years of teaching, but it serves as the touchstone for current teachers' philosophy, which promotes problem-based learning, and is embedded in the overall design of the DAS program, as well as the courses that constitute it.

In my course packs, I map out this teaching philosophy – taking the cue from Ingold's concept of learning as a process of intellectual wayfaring – as one that is Collaborative (Open-hearted); Processual (Open-minded but not Empty-Headed) and Participative (Open-Door), but mindful of limitations or boundaries. At the core of these collaborative, processual and participative frames and methods, is what I detect as the DAS faculty's perception that our role as humanities teachers is

“not to solve a problem or answer a particular question, but to illuminate the topic; to deepen and at the same time complicate our understanding of it; to advance the conversation about it; to open new and unanticipated avenues of reflection and inquiry into this topic and those to which it may turn out to be suggestively related. (Our) role, in other words, is not forensic, diagnostic, pragmatic, or therapeutic.” (Fish; qtd. in Knapp 50) Our role is *humanistic*; we explore problems, not solutions, we focus more on the process and not “useful” or “applied” outcomes, or recipes for dealing with current and future crises but a deepened understanding of the questions and moral conundrums that artists and scholars, researchers and teachers present for our contemplation.”²

In the faculty's numerous discussions on crafting our course packs, I deduce that the faculty is aware that in these times of uncertainty, what we must bring to the table is not so much an argument or a justification about how “useful” the humanities are, especially in these tough times, but a certain kind of *exemplification*, of bringing to life our passion and “excitement about what's it like to engage in the kind of reflection, that as Stanley Fish writes, ‘poses problems and teases them out to their edges’” (Knapp 51). In the process our classrooms turn – online or face to face – into sites of “coming together of the odd and the unexpected, of shared and contending subjectivities, narratives and passions,” of suffering and suffering, congregating around “the promise of a subject, an insight, a creative possibility” (Rogoff).

How are these principles made operational in a context of the current pandemic, where possibilities for a future are yet to be imagined? Are we looking at a world where the virus stays with us but more or less controlled? Or is it a world where we return to pre-pandemic conditions, if at all possible? The meshwork of possibilities is thick with countless scenarios; what we do know is that the many disruptive twists and turns and surprises that cross our paths simply do not lend themselves to totalizing narratives. How then do we reinvent the study and teaching of art, broadly conceived and defined, in this context?

Let me count the ways.

How We Teach

In May 2021, I initiated a virtual guest lecture series on *Art and Art Making in the Time of COVID*³. The series served as a major component – actually a final project – in my syllabus for Art Studies 143 (Contemporary Art), a required course for all Art Studies majors. The course was instituted in 2018, after a major revision of the BA Art Studies curriculum, the only program of its kind in the Philippines, if not in Southeast Asia⁴. I accepted the assignment to teach the course with reservations, since I felt that it is best taught in less restrictive and vexed conditions. But judging from the way this pandemic was and is turning out for us, we decided to offer the course according to schedule (2nd semester of AY 2020-21, January to June 2021); we thought that delaying it would further disrupt our majors' lives, not to mention their curricular schedules.

The series was organized, with detailed instructions in the Activity Guide, by a pioneering group of 15 students, most of them Art Studies majors, who have gone through the many required prerequisites that provided them with foundational knowledge, frames and methods of the discipline. A few were newly-admitted graduate students, and at least one was a Speech and Theater major who took the course as an elective. Earlier in the semester, I grouped these students together, with inputs from the class, making sure that the “veteran” Art Studies majors will guide the “newbies,” and help them adjust to the UP culture, and the Art Studies ecosystem, as well as negotiate the steep learning curve of the Moodle-based University Virtual Learning Environment or UVLê.

As I pointed out in the summing up synchronous session, this group carries the distinction, not only as the first batch of Art Stud 143 students; they were also the first batch who went through the perils and joys of learning contemporary art via remote mode. They valiantly took on the tasks of organizing, coordinating with speakers, preparing the publicity materials, moderating and hosting the sessions. They were, in other words, running the show, amidst many other requirements in other classes, and their different struggles at home and the workplace.

The guest lecture series was also pivotal in implementing a syllabus which should have been ideally conducted via face-to-face encounters with most, if not all, artworks. The class would have gone through many fieldworks – to museums, to sites beyond Manila, and artists’ studios. But since such was not possible, we instead invited guest speakers coming from diverse locations: from Baroda in India; Bacolod in the Visayas, Central Philippines; Mountain Province in the Cordilleras, Northern Philippines to Quezon City in Manila. In pre-pandemic days, the guest lecturer would have visited our classrooms, or we would have visited them. The conversation would have been limited to only a few; however, with the help of the internet – no matter how spotty and unstable – we made the sessions available to a much larger public outside the classroom. As we were going through the preparation stage, the idea of giving out certificates and getting feedback through surveys took shape. The process became a combination of planned strategies and unplanned or organic flow, which was especially crucial in negotiating the many life-threatening surprises we encountered at many points during the course of the learning journey.

As we traced our lines of travel, we got caught up with another, converging into a meshwork of relational wayfaring, where the sites of encounter took place along several, interlocking paths – be they in a café, a farm, an artist’s home, an open space, a blog – all synchronously meshworking in the sessions of the series. We saw this very clearly with artists’ collectives like *Womanifesto* (via the artist Varsha Nair) and *Gantala Press* (via the writer Faye Cura), and the ways by which they link communities through collaborations between and among professionals and basic sectors. The artist as organizer and cultural worker was also concretely seen in the work of Guenivere Decena, the artist from Bacolod, who organized various independent initiatives for artists to talk about their practices through a digital platform. In a similar vein, three faculty members of the DAS showed us, through their *Bridging the Gap* project, the process by which they linked teachers from various disciplines to talk about artworks in a way that will encourage “slow viewing.” Through voice recordings and visuals – the organizers (Prof. Louise Marcelino, Prof. Robin Rivera, and Mr. Mark Louie Lugue) call it vodcasts – they produced instructional materials for viewing and studying art in the context of separation and lockdown restrictions⁵.

When our lines of travel intersected, we thought of our multiple roles – as parents, teachers, organizers, students – and our specific situations. The keyword that emerged out of the discussions is “decentralize,” to go very local and very personal. The Manila-based artist Mark Salvatus, for example, talked about his performance work with his son, and how they turned their home into an exhibition/ installation site of ephemeral sculptures made out of domestic and mundane objects. The objects

acquired many other lives as Instagram posts, with most of the materials going back to their original state and functions as soon as the pictures were posted. Like Decena, Salvatus initiated artist-run projects, the most recent of which is *Load Na Dito*, which he co-organized with and currently maintains with his wife, the curator Mayumi Hirano. In the final instalment of our series, we learned how Rocky Cajigan, who resides and works in La Trinidad, in the Mountain Province, constantly re-imagines his personal history as part of an indigenous community and as part of a generation of artists from the Cordilleras.

Upon hearing the stories of the artists, we hoped to encourage the listeners to *grow into knowledge* by placing and connecting the events of their own lives to that of the people they encountered in the guest lecture sessions. Through what we might call as “guided discovery,” each story took them “so far, until you come across another that will take you further” (Volosinov; qtd. in Ingold 162).

This process of discovery can be further demonstrated by one of the initial exercises: a Cultural Map Survey, which adopted a detailed checklist developed by Felice Sta. Maria. Through the survey, I invited the students (and I quote from my preface) to

“get to know our own immediate surroundings... Depending on quarantine restrictions in your community, you can go around your neighborhood and/or the internet to explore and identify, if you can and to your knowledge, the cultural assets and resources in your own ‘backyards,’ so to speak. As you go through the survey, you will probably come to realize that there are many areas of your own localities that you know next to nothing about, and that these gaps in your knowledge can open avenues/topics for research.”

During our first synchronous session, I felt an undercurrent of reluctance, largely out of doubt about finding anything in their small, remote towns, to which I replied: “just go through the process, and see where it takes you.”

The outputs validated the exercise. When I checked the Forum Board the morning after the deadline, the thread of replies upon replies moved to me craft my running lecture synthesis this way:

“I woke up yesterday and saw 62 posts! I woke up this morning and I saw additional ‘unread’ posts.

“The results of the Cultural Map exercise went beyond expectations. I see you conversing, connecting, and relating with each other. Really, really good signs that our online environment has provided a safe space for lively discussion!”

The students gathered their “data” by reaching out to their elders, their local government units, and other informants they can ask through phone and in person. Others let their fingers do the walking and went online; still others relied on what their memories can tell them since actual walking and direct observation were well-nigh impossible, for most of them. In the process, and I quote from what I wrote on the Discussion Forum Board:

“I saw you paying attention and appreciating what you took for granted and found the richness of everyday life from your own communities. And I saw you reflexively thinking about yourselves, your attitudes, your ways of gathering data - still very incomplete, very unreliable and I saw you making a note to self - asking questions, and vowing to make more explorations.

“This board remains open - keep the discussions going, let us tell more unreliable stories - the journey, the process is more important, rather than the destination. Mabuhay kayo!!!!”

The Discussion Board mimics social media, in form, but owing to prompts in the Activity Guide, I was careful to remind the class that this and other activities aim to provide them with a platform in which thoughtful exchanges beyond simple expressions of agreement or disagreement, empty praises, and inane comments could take place. Taking a leaf, with permission, from a course pack of my colleague Mr. Jaime Salazar (2020), I directed the replies with this guide, aiming to surface prior knowledge, information gathered from academic and non-academic sources, burning questions, arguments and counter-arguments.

Part of first post	Thinking prompt
Connection	How are the readings connected to your prior knowledge, whether academic or non-academic, and experience? Discuss one clear, substantive link.
Citation	What is one word, phrase, or sentence from the text that you believe to be important to remember? Identify it and explain why.
Question, Contention, or Application	Choose only one from the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A question that aims to clarify, elaborate on, or hypothesize about something in the text that you are uncertain about; ● A well-supported counter-argument to a main argument of the text; or ● An application of key concepts in the text to examples that the text does not cover.

In almost every class, students were cautious and even hesitant to participate in the initial conversations, because they do not or hardly know each other, while others are simply shy and end up with one-liners – “wow!” Or “that is a great idea.” Thus, another layer of prompts aims to initiate more threads and connections, provoke more questions, with studied comments, compliments.

Part of additional post	Thinking prompt
Compliment	What do you like, find exciting, or believe to be valuable about the earlier post, keeping in mind your own first post? Point it out and explain your reasons for saying so.
Comment	What is your considered position on the earlier post, keeping in mind your own first post? Respond to or elaborate on a significant concept, theme, question, statement, or argument.
Connection	How do you relate to the earlier post, keeping in mind your own first post? Describe the values, beliefs, emotions, or experiences that come into play for you.
Question	What are you wondering about with regard to the earlier post, keeping in mind your own first post? Articulate what you are uncertain about or wish to consider from a different perspective.

What We Do When We Do Art Studies

I was pleased to note that in the process of prompting and at times compelling students to go through this journey, the outputs resonated – directly or tangentially - to what the faculty, in light of key developments in the theory and practice of Art Studies, – had deemed to be, in various discussions during the curricular reviews, the four main directions of the discipline, which are as follows:

- the **deconstruction** of the category of art, and the postcolonial critique of the canon, its concepts and definitions of art. The critical approach to art is reflected in one of the very first questions discussed in the General Education (GE) and advanced Art Studies courses: What is

art? Art is taught as a social and historical construct rather than as an absolute, pre-given idea. Informed by critical theory, postcolonial approaches, gender theories, cultural studies, anthropological studies, and others, art is historicized, deconstructed, redefined, demystified and unmasked for its colonial and elitist roots. We are critical of the canons of art, and the institutions that have shaped them.

- the **expansion** of parameters and the reconceptualization of art—historical, theoretical and critical categories, drawing on methods and approaches from other disciplines, but firmly grounded on the discipline of art studies. In Art Studies, we conceive of art broadly, encompassing forms which may not traditionally be thought of as art. “Art,” not only refers to the “fine arts” of painting, sculpture, for example, but to a broad array of creative products and environments – from photographs in social media, to street theater, rap music, weaving, movie billboards, malls, tabloids, realist drama, installations, montage, epics, urban planning, ballet, pictures, television, public monuments, and so on. The study of these art forms is framed by the methods and approaches of key disciplines: Art History, Art Criticism, Art Theory and Aesthetics, Curation, and Arts Management.
- the foregrounding of **local knowledge** drawn from Philippine and Asian cultures as a central resource. There is a conscious effort to make students know about Philippine art forms and traditions, framed as part of broader national, regional (Southeast Asia and Asia) and global contexts. This reflects the strong nationalist orientation of the department, which has always been critical of the Euro-American centric legacies of art history, but also in constant dialogue with the world.
- the resolve of Art Studies to fully commit to the promise of **transformation** of society and the transformative power of art. Art, in what I refer to as a “refunctioned Humanities” (Datuin 2011, 108), is not just a parade of artists and objects. To borrow from Jeannette Winterson (via Flores 1995), art objects are not a collector’s item; let the noun become an active force: Art Objects. And it is in this key note of art objecting that we continue to impart in our classrooms the role of art as an agent of social change, a vital part - in the words of our esteemed colleague and mentor, the late Prof. Emerita Alice Guillermo (1998) - “in the making of history towards a human and just order which still eludes our grasp at the present” (56)

Let us take a look at two examples of how these directions were concretized in the outputs of Art Studies 143.

One reply to a post on the group work on Pasig, Las Piñas and Batangas, went like this (partly edited)

“I would like to ask regarding the statement, “‘Contemporary’ means any work, object, or place that is made in the current times. It is any work produced since the 60s.” Is this definition set by a scholar of some renown? If so, who was it? Or is this some widely agreed upon idea? Or is it perhaps set by the local governments of Pasig, Las Pinas and Batangas?”

And in an astonishing turn towards the immediate vicinity of the personal, and the mundane, but pointing to possible research problems, the writer continued:

“I am also very much interested with the boatmaking and the *kakanin* (rice cake). Do the boatbuilders continue to construct their boats with local materials or is this the more modern kind? And what kind of *kakanin* are produced, I wonder. My favorite

is the sumang pinipig and it would be nice if you could recommend some other delicacies to me.”

Another post diligently directed us to research method specifically on how data was gathered through color-coded pins and threads, and I quote at length:

“For this cultural map, I present the arts of Nasugbu, a coastal town bordered by mountains in the province of Batangas. The town offers art forms which reflect a wide array of the culture and histories of the town. In Datuin’s “Shifts and Turns in Art Studies” (2011)⁴ the critique of the canon and the expansion on the parameters and definition of “art” is important in understanding the art and culture of this provincial town.

In this short explanation, I will guide you in discovering and rediscovering art forms which bears the collective knowledge of the people of Nasugbu. To ease the study of my chosen art forms, I color coded them based on the amount of information available.

First, the green pin, which includes the Kaybiang Tunnel, the latest architectural wonder in the town which connected it to other areas previously separated by mountains, (the green pin signifies the wide availability of information from documented sources. On the other hand, most of the historical artifacts and tangible markers are marked by yellow pins and threads which shows the availability of some information through interviews with the locals and experts but still lacked proper documentation and study. This means that these art forms need further research. Examples include the Parola (lighthouses), religious artifacts such as the Nasugbu Bell and the Nuestra Señora dela Escalera, the old Train, and the Lumang Simbahan (Church Ruins).

“Lastly, the ones marked by red pins and threads are the art forms which exists by themselves as a tangible representation of the area’s art and culture but significantly lacks the study and documentation although an important aspect of the society. Such as in the case of the boat-making, an important aspect of coastal and fishing culture which dates back to the town’s peopling in pre-colonial times, the sweet pastry (kakanin) making, which dates back to the Spanish period as a town that mainly produces sugar. The information about these art forms are gathered based on the knowledge of the locals specially the elders, experts such as historians and church officials, and other documents. Personally, I find the ones unknown as the most interesting and in need of further study and exploration.”

What Crisis?

From this account of the Cultural Map and Guest Lecture Series experiments in Art Studies 143, I hope I have demonstrated that the Department’s four philosophical directions are highly interrelated; taken together, they implicate reflection, evaluation, judgement and critique – processes that are especially crucial in times of crisis. The term ‘crisis’ itself is synonymous with ‘critique,’ if we are to take notice of Reinhart Kosseleck’s reminder of the terms’ etymological origins (qtd. in Ladkin et al. 30). ‘Critique’ and ‘crisis’ can be traced to the Greek word ‘krisis,’ which means “dividing, choosing, judging, and deciding thus implicating not only dissent and controversy but also to a decision that has been reached and to a judgement that is passed. “Critique” is the subjective evaluation or decision concerning a conflictual and controversial process – a crisis.”

As Hannah Arendt, writing about “The Crisis of Education,” puts it: “crisis forces us back to the questions themselves and requires from us either new or old answers, but in any case direct judgement. A crisis becomes a disaster only when we respond to it with preformed judgements, that is,

with prejudices. Such an attitude not only sharpens the crisis but makes us forfeit the experience of reality and the opportunity for reflection it produces” (qtd. in Ladkin et al. 9).

When we were pondering on how to prepare our course packs for ARTS 1 (Critical Perspectives in the Arts), a required General Education (GE) course for all students in UP Diliman and most other campuses in the UP System, we sat down to reflect and ask questions, old and new. We reviewed the materials that the department had produced in the past for its general education courses to remind us of our intellectual history, our enduring interests, tendencies, and commitments, and map these out with the four philosophical directions as compass. We took the discussions as an opportunity for asking ourselves hard questions, the most provocative of which were posed by Dr. Patrick Flores, and I quote from an email thread (2020)

“Do we begin with art or with sensing and the sensible? We might be investing art with default privilege. Can we complicate this at the outset? That art is only one moment of sensible experience and that it is critically, and therefore productively, rendered as subject of reflection with this in mind?

“Can we also complicate the "human" especially in the time of the pandemic? What about the non-human or the post-human? Can we at least allude to this universe of nature, spirits, viruses, cyborgs, and so on?”

To which I responded by admitting that we do need to decenter the anthropocentrism of our syllabi, with a keen attention to shifts in media and ecologies of seeing, thinking and feeling.

Dr. Flores also suggested that maybe we can revisit and reconsider the list of sources.

“It leans heavily on the critical and the analytical. What about the experiential, the phenomenological, the mystical, or the poetic? Also, can we have a more delicate mix and feature more eccentric authors from other sites like Southeast Asia, the Pacific, Africa, or the like? And what about our commitment to other sources of knowing? Can we have sources that straddle and elude disciplinary recognition? Like a scientist writing on ballet? I am also interested in a set of readings of different registers. Critical theory, surely, but what about: criticism, journalism, polemics, memoir, biography, diary, court decision, and so on? I think we can be more creative in curating this citational universe.”

How did we respond to these cues and provocations? I draw on some passages from a report by Salazar on the promise of practice delivered during a College of Arts and Letters assembly (2021)

On expansion of the citational universe, Salazar presented this harvest:

- One introductory module dealt with creativity and the human condition, featuring a work of non-fiction by Mary Gordon, in which Gordon embarks on a sustained juxtaposition of anecdotes on her dying mother and moments from the life and art of the post-Impressionist painter Pierre Bonnard.
- A culminating module encouraged students to grapple with the Heideggerian concept of dwelling in relation to not only a phenomenological study on examples of Philippine contemporary art, but also personal essays on food and the home by Rica Bolipata-Santos, and an article on sinigang (similar to Tom Yum in Thai) by Doreen Fernandez, an appraisal of the smartphone by Allan Greenfield, and a physics-inflected rumination on ballet by the physicist Alan Lightman.

Everyday life was explored in the following ways:

- A module on food, which begins with an activity in which each student is asked to demonstrate their grasp of the elements and principles of visual design by composing a still life out of food items in their kitchen, before diving deeper into the social, historical, and cultural contexts of food.
- Touching similarly on food within a unit on art and world-making, another prompts students to reflect on the ordinariness and pleasures of eating vis-à-vis vital concerns around global food production, including the ways in which artists have dealt with food consumption and the potential of our eating habits to contribute to the rise of pandemics.
- Combining visual analysis and small-scale cultural mapping, an activity instructs students to select three to five items from their home or their community, take pictures of them, and describe them in terms of their formal elements, mode of production, and context.
- In the midst of the contemporary mediascape, which is characterized by accelerated and voluminous flows of images, one activity aims to alert students to the vigorous interplay between art and technology by asking them to study an infographic disseminated by a government agency through its Facebook account.
- Another activity centered on self-portraits, guided by pertinent essays on the meanings of the content produced by the social media influencers that students follow, particularly their selfies, a staple in the influencer repertoire.

The attempt to be sensitive to students' situations also spurred some faculty to create alternative classrooms - from an offline website featuring avatars or the teacher's alter egos (from pets to self-created comics characters), to a progressive web application that adjusts to any screen shape, with low memory size and bandwidth demand aimed at students with limited hardware and internet access. The faculty also strove to craft and implement course policies that rendered more plainly visible the principles of flexibility and compassion that we have been continuously encouraged to uphold in our dealings with our students.

Turning

Through arts-based activities, we encourage our students to **PROBE** their surroundings, learn where to search for information, and discover which ideas to pay attention to from a range of perspectives and points of view. With the lens of the self and the mundane as starting point, we aim to guide learners towards an exploration of world around “effortlessly” through what the poet Jane Hirshfield describes as the ‘effortless effort of creativity’” (qtd in Jones 3), which in itself also involves “concentration and concerted movement – toward an into inquiry or ‘what may be known,’ of emotion and affect or ‘what may be felt,’ and of action or ‘what may be done’” (Jones, 3).

When the way forward is neither simple nor clear, we approach our tasks as teachers with a lingering sense of *bagabag*, chastened by the thought that conditions are critical. In these tough times, we might be tempted to be jealous of other pursuits, or the more practical disciplines and experts who are mobilized to contribute and respond to the crisis, by default. We might also be tempted to justify our worth, vis-à-vis those in the ‘spotlight’ – “the medical and technological sciences, and the areas of politics, economics, and governance,” as the invitation to speak for the forum and write for this volume states.

Going back to the etymology of the term crisis, Kosseleck (qtd. in Ladkin et al.) recalls that in the Middle Ages, the terms “krisis” and “kritik” were restricted to medical terminology, “which designates a stage in the development of a disease that is a turning point and during which the decisive diagnosis concerning the healing or worsening of the patient is reached. Expressions like a ‘critical illness’ and the ‘patient is in critical condition’ are evidence that this original philological context has been carried over to the English language” (Ladkin et al. 30).

I wonder: have we reached a so-called “turning point” a year after the series of lockdowns, one of, if not the longest in the world – in various incarnations and stages? Are we indeed in critical condition or is it a series of critical conditions? Based on the June 2021 statistics, more than million cases and counting (as of July 2021), the highest in Southeast Asia, it appears that the patient’s condition is worsening, instead of healing.

In the face of such a very alarming critical condition, how do we – educators in the arts and humanities – participate in this perilous terrain? Taking the cue from Rogoff, I wish to suggest that in the phrase “turning point”, we pay more attention to the active verb “turning” as a “generative moment in which a new horizon emerges in the process ... a moment of speculation, expansion and reflexivity without the constant demand for proven results.” This might come across as self-indulgent navel grazing to some, but I wish to posit, again turning to Rogoff, that education in the arts and the humanities is in and of the world – not a RESPONSE or reaction to crisis, but part of its ongoing complexity, not reacting to realities but producing them. Often, these practices end up being low-key, uncategorizable, non-heroic, and certainly not uplifting, but nevertheless immensely creative.”

To demonstrate, let us return to your pencils (or pens or markers), and take the line for a walk, but this time, let us trace lines in the air with our pencils or even with our fingers. We may even abandon our seats of confinement and draw lines with our bodies. We can dance, pirouette, leap, and prance and as we do so, we do not actually see the actual lines, do we? But we do feel the wind and the imperceptible changes in their current as we “draw” the lines with our gestures, moving around, to and from places elsewhere towards something else, perhaps largely invisible, but nonetheless very much felt. That “something else” is hope, not for a concrete and practical outcome or desirable future, but something where possibilities are as endless as they are “useless” in practical and concrete terms. I am talking about hope – for a “certain quality of mind, not a body of knowledge or a list of books read or music listened to or skills developed in the process but rather a way of life in which the mind never ceases to be filled with wonder at the world and all of its people, in which there is unquenchable thirst to understand more ... (and in which) our frame of reference expands considerably” (Randel 36).

If we are really hoping to hone this quality of mind in our learners, then our role as humanities teachers is, to use what Spivak describes as a crude analogy, “to exercise that mind in the same way as workouts exercise the body. Just as without exercise the body has no strength and suppleness, so does the mind without exercise” (103). The humanities, in other words, is the gym of the wayfaring mind.

As I bring this presentation to a temporary close, I invite you to continue our meanderings with the line. At some point, we might come upon an interesting path being cleared by the French artist, Ven Vautier, who is known for his text-based paintings, once proclaimed in his 1997 painting that *All Art is Useless. Go Home*. My colleagues and I use this work as an example of the various ways or “strains,” by which we define the kind of art that strives for relative autonomy from pressures to be useful or contribute something of value. But like Peter Thompson, I revel in being useless, of being low profile, non-heroic, below the radar. We do have value, says Thompson, but we are not a commodity, or

a tool or handmaiden that reacts to a crisis. “We provide a service, but we are not servants. We are useless, but we are vital.”

As with a story, this paper ends, but the ending is potentially another beginning, as we continue to take the line for a walk into many other paths, and turnings that might shed some light on this disruptive darkness of the lived moment we find ourselves in.

ENDNOTES

- 1 “Frisson” refers to “...the thrill of the senses that arouse, enliven, quicken. A shiver or a chill, the frisson is an omen; it is as well a visceral response.” Frisson was also used as title of a volume on the **Collected Criticism of Alice Guillermo**, which is evocative of Flores’s body of works, which Flores as a “stirring that drew her to her art, the same catalyst that she redistributed across the decisively, relentlessly social form.” (Flores 2019, 8)
- 2 This is not to say that the sciences and humanities are distinct and separate spheres. In my talk in a roundtable conference on Disaster Risk Management (<https://youtu.be/P8LIZ8jbg0Q>), I even argued that the dichotomy is “cosmetic, if not false and needless.”
- 3 For a complete playlist of the Art Studies 143 Lecture Series, please go to: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLcve_pX3r2H3yUUkZ8mvASibfPbLQK4e1
- 4 For more details on the Department of Art Studies curricular programs, please go to <https://das.kal.upd.edu.ph/>
- 5 For complete recordings of the *Bridging the Gap* vodcasts, please go to https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLcve_pX3r2H1vHsScEU0bZmf29X9CSiJg

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