

A Multisensory Approach to Teaching Writing and Literature

By Dr. Julia Keefer

Dr. Julia Keefer is the Principal Investigator of a cross-disciplinary research project to improve pedagogy in writing, literature, speech arts, and health humanities and wellness classes. Dr. Wenjuan Li, from the Center for Academic Excellence and Support, was the first associate researcher, helping to de-identify data in the fall of 2019. This article is a summary of the first phase of ongoing research of an New York University IRB-approved research grant begun in the summer of 2019. As the project continues, more detailed analysis of data will make the research both quantitative and qualitative.

Online Education during the Peri-COVID Pandemic 2019-2020

My eminent colleague, Professor Steve McCarty, President of the World Association for Online Education, just sent me this email (August 17, 2020) about a keynote he was preparing, "I will explain online education in a broad sense, and as a pan-disciplinary set of meta-skills beyond subject matter expertise. So for most teachers, online education can serve as an auxiliary discipline, like when the study of languages in the humanities uses social science research methods." This pan-disciplinary tool of online education buttresses my cross-disciplinary approach to problem solving that focuses on Boolean circles intersecting the fields of health science/wellness, literature, and the environment. I have been the editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Online Education* since 1998, initially appointed by the World Association for Online Education. During the COVID Pandemic, the world has been forced to adopt various aspects of asynchronous, synchronous, HyFlex, and blended learning. Presidents and Mayors pontificate about the inferiority of online learning, saying it cannot do what classroom learning can do. Agreed, but it does different things and it is 100% safe and usually cheaper in the long run. Students can create their own multisensory worlds alone or with safe small groups of family, friends, or peers. Senses are starved in masks and classrooms reeking of Clorox where all talking is a chore and even a hazard. Online learning is 24/7, tailored to the time zones, learning styles, cognitive domains, and biorhythms of individual students. My study relates to college students because K12 students may have different challenges, depending on the support they get from families, tutors, and communities. Online learning forces my students to develop their own study habits, writing discipline, and ways to enhance their creative and critical thinking.

Zoom and other video conferencing can be badly done but it is the future of digital performing, remote working, and telemedicine. There are many sides to Zoom. Some students feel ashamed of their surroundings when they do not even have enough blank wall to put up a virtual background. Shared spaces may be so noisy that they cannot hear, talk, and concentrate so one student locked himself in a cupboard. Professors may also have their constraints and challenges. Corporations foster a focused style of Zooming that can be fake and forced, retouching and manipulating the headshot image and manufacturing smiles and sparkling eyes. This may be appropriate for faculty meetings. Some Zooms reinforce the power dynamics of a traditional classroom where the professor is the boss. Students may retaliate against long lectures and endless Power Points with Zoom bombing or multitasking that takes them away from the class even though they get credit for attendance. Faculty can flip the zoom to make students teach the class before they get too frustrated. Many people resent the intrusion into their private spaces, so they put up sheets or virtual background, dress formally from the neck up, and moderate their conversation and facial expressions. But Zoom could be a valuable tool to enter the real intimate home of a depressed, diseased patient in order to help. Back problems can be fixed if the

therapist sees how the patient is sitting, where they sleep, what is really in their fridge, and what they look like naturally at home.

I am a fitness instructor as well as a professor and have used the mindbody connection since I designed my first class online, Language and the Body, in 1995 on NYU's i2 server. This project links to my career as a writing and literature professor where the modus operandi is the written word that I connect to the senses of the body. Distance learning can be more intimate. Remote learning can push students' faces closer to each other through Zoom and non-stop forum posts. In an asynchronous online class, diversity and inclusion can mask faces and names to focus on writing so students are not unconsciously or consciously stereotyped. Collaboration and teamwork can be facilitated by Zooming that is more convenient than struggling with subways, buses, and cars to get to a certain place at a certain time. The campus life is wonderful, and it will return in its full sensory flowering. Meanwhile this is the time to be creative with online learning, buttressed by field trips and outdoor events, a safe choice that will enrich the entire curriculum with blended learning when the community is vaccinated. Many health care workers in my neighborhood are plasma positive but they sacrificed health and even lives to achieve their own community immunity. It is dangerous to turn teachers into first responders because some lack the medical training. Health care workers do not talk to patients for hours and are better at PPE. They go into medicine knowing they must treat infectious diseases. But risking your life should not be a prerequisite to teach at school when online options are available and have not been developed properly.

Traditional American students entering college directly from high school look forward to the full campus experience but after teaching writing and literature in person and online for over 30 years, I realized that most of the finals in the online classes were better written and researched than in my in-person classes. I checked for plagiarism. The focus on the written word as communication and 24/7 support instead of the once-a-week in person lecture worked beautifully for non-traditional students of different ages and backgrounds, especially for international students and mature students working in full time jobs with families. They appreciated the flexibility. But a strictly online program for students in a lockdown or stuck in their childhood room is problematic.

I taught strictly online asynchronous classes for 2019-2020 but the multisensory umbrella of my research project could include in person classes in the future, especially for Embodied Poetry, Health Humanities and Wellness, or the writing core classes for young, traditional students.

The Sensory Experience

Smell lilacs or freshly ground coffee (olfactory), taste your favorite food (gustatory), pet your precious cat or dog (tactile), use your body for exhilarating exercise, dance, martial arts, love, or chores (kinesthetic), listen to birdsong, music, or purrs (auditory), admire the images of beautiful art and landscapes (visual), and take a sensuous bath by combining all senses (synesthetic) while you walk in the woods or by the sea. It is challenging to read global literature under COVID when the senses are cut off by masks, quarantine, and the disease itself. But the goal is the same--to make words bleed, smell, taste, feel, sing, and emit colorful images connecting them to the real world. COVID 19 virus kills the senses, especially smell and taste, and tortures the kinesthetic sense with blocked, painful breathing and aching muscles. People look spooky in these masks and everything they say is muffled or inaudible. So we must remember what the world used to feel like or imagine a time when senses will return to normal. The park is full of ebullient nature, tulips exposing themselves, hydrangea exuding their fragrance, and birds

singing as if nothing was wrong. Yet animals can catch the virus--tigers in the Bronx zoo and pets like cats and dogs. The Internet flattens the organic world into images and sounds we can control, traveling around the world through a little box. But literature insists on the smells, tastes, feelings, and kinesthetic responses that flesh out worlds so the characters can inhabit them to make their struggles more realistic and dramatic. From the moment we toss in bed, stretch our bodies, hear birdsong, smell coffee, and taste food we inhabit our daily sensory world.

Global Literature

The job of intelligent readers is to open these precious books and recreate their geography and history through imagination and memory, hearing the connotative as well as the denotative language, and role-playing the characters for greater empathy. My examples are pleasurable sensations, but global literature is filled with descriptions of sensory horror caused by war, terrorism, climate catastrophe, crimes, and disease. One reason for reading is to develop empathy for characters who are experiencing pain, fear, and horror. This requires imagination to convert tiny black marks on a white page to a reconstruction of the sensory world described in the novel so that the reader experiences this sensuality in their own way. Sensory descriptions are connected to figurative language such as similes, metaphors, and personification and the sound of language resonating in tone color through onomatopoeia, assonance, consonance, and meter or rhythm, literary devices that form the fabric of the connotative meaning of the words. Hyper-professional, health care, and business-oriented students usually focus on the denotative, or literal meaning of words, a useful technique to rapidly communicate in emergencies. But literature is the art of language dependent on readers' ability to appreciate the aesthetic considerations of connotative meanings. When we read words on a page, the easiest interpretation is denotative--what is the topic, the claim, the point of view, the theme, or the information? My students understand denotative meanings right away and relate them to their lives. Course themes of diversity, inclusion, health humanities and environmentalism resonate with their aspirations and career objectives. It takes more effort to analyze the connotative significance of words and to re-imagine the worlds they describe as if we were going on a virtual trip.

Everyone eats every day. Inspired by my eBook *Carving Your Story* that connects story, structure, characterization, and language to food analogies, here is a menu that my students made up to link food to literary devices and authors from our global reading list:

APPETIZERS AND SPIRITS

Al Aswany, Alliteration, Analogy, Anapest

Artichokes

Assonance

Babaganoush, Baklava, Beaujolais

Becket, Beigbeder, Borges

Brie, Broccoli, Bordeaux

Camembert, Caesura, Camus

Carrots

Climax, Conclusion, Confrontation, Conrad, Consonance, Crisis, Cummings, Dactylic, DeLillo, Dramatic Structure

Dumplings

Duras, Eliot, Ellison, Endives, Hersey

Humus

Lawrence, McEwan, Mahfouz, Marquez, Morrison, Metaphor, Meter, Nabokov, Narrative, Onomatopoeia, Ordinary World/Special World

Oysters

Personification, Plot Point, Poetry, Proust, Pynchon, Pyrrhic, Rhyme, Rhythm

Ricotta, Risotto

ENTREE

Catalyst, Central Dramatic Question

Chicken

Iambic, Improvisation, Ionesco, Irony, Joyce, Kafka, Kebab, Keefer, Khalifeh

Knish, Lamb Shish kebab

Pamuk, Paz

Pasta, Pizza

Rushdie, Safran-Foer, Salad, Sartre, Simile

Scallion Pancakes, Shrimp, Spinach, Spondee, Steak

Story, Theme, Updike, Watercress, Wiesel, Woolf, Wilentz...WOW!

Literature and Food, Literature and Sex/Love, Literature and Violence/Terrorism, Literature and Politics, Literature and Religion, Literature and Science, Literature and Business, Literature and Health, Literature and Sickness, Literature and the Environment

Literature and Life

As a humanities professor, I am used to qualitative research, descriptive and often anecdotal, but as the Principal Investigator of an NYU IRB-approved study, I compared midterms that described the themes in literature addressing the denotative language to finals where a detour into the sensory world via pictures and poetry enabled them to analyze connotative meanings of language. More attention to connotative language improves their writing style, another learning outcome, and enhances the diversity and inclusion themes via cross-cultural comparison and contrast the way tourism and eating ethnic food give us a sensory appreciation of other cultures.

Wet Ink Pilot

In the spring of 2020, at the request of the Center for Academic Excellence and Support, I piloted a new Learning Management System called Wet Ink. At first students were confused by Wet Ink and resented having to learn new software as well as read a challenging global literature list. Wet Ink is a writing intensive LMS without audio and video components although lessons and assignments are decorated with images. It facilitates informal and formal writing, hence the term Wet Ink, and encourages more peer interaction and critiques than the Sakai LMS of NYU Classes. Images are round, something that worked to show the coronavirus. In the past I taught this class without class photos so no one knew the race, color, age, or even sex of the classmate or me unless they knew each other from other classes. But Wet Ink posts pictures of everyone. There were no synchronous meetings. For assessment I make comments on each assignment, put them in their individual, confidential progress report, and consult the analytics to determine their participation. I used creative, pertinent images related to the Pandemic to accompany lessons and assignments. Although it is not as thorough as Google docs collaboration, Wet Ink permits more annotation by the professor and peers than the Sakai LMS. While NYU cannot adopt this LMS, since they will migrate to Bright Space in 2021, its use shows the need for optimal design, interface, and interaction to facilitate my research object of improving writing and literature through a multisensory approach. Going forward, oral interpretation of texts, role playing as I did years ago with Cyberperformances in person or via Zoom or immersive technology, and embodied poetry, using kickbox, ballet, and nonlinear belly dance to mimic rhythm and prosody in poetry, will enhance this ongoing research project.

At a momentous time in history during a world pandemic, Wet Ink was perfect because it is asynchronous, easy to use, low tech, and enabled us to enter the metaphoric and symbolic sensory world of literature, the ultimate objective. Hence the claim that no syllabus in online learning exists without an appropriate LMS and that this pedagogical house must be evaluated as well as the professor, students, and course. A multisensory approach to reading and writing does not negate the translation of text to ideas, the semiotics or analysis of signs and symbols, and the need for abstract thinking. It is not my intention to let new, commercial Learning Management Systems distract students with their visuals and interaction like social media but to use them, as well as other modalities like food analogies, comparisons to other arts, onsite field research into the sensory world, linking language and the body (movement, dance, martial arts to prosody) and non-verbal communication to the study of people in research and characters in fiction. The Learning Outcomes of improving skills in thinking, reading,

analyzing, creating, synthesizing, arguing, writing, and editing are paramount as well as the cultural foundation of diversity, inclusion, health humanities, and global communication.

This IRB study required careful planning and a research team. The results confirmed my hypothesis and finals were published in an online journal. The students nicknamed it Bloody Ink because it inspired them to connect the stress that they felt under lockdown with the pain of characters in our global reading list via their intellectual autobiographies.

Course Content

For the first part of the semester students read epistolary works by Ta Ne-hesi Coates, James Baldwin, and Ocean Vuong, compared Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* to analyze the delusions and inequalities of the American Dream. From Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in 1899 to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in 1958 to Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* in 1998 to Mario Vargas Llosa's *Dream of the Celt* in 2010 to Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* in 2013 we traveled through time and space for a perspective on the horrors of colonialism. The health humanities section began with Egyptian author Dr. Nawal el Saadawi's *Memoirs of a Female Doctor*. Then came the Pandemic so I added Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice* and Albert Camus' *The Plague* as options to the reading list. By the end of spring break, NYU went remote and the country, and most of the world, were on lockdown. When students complained about their quarantine, I added Sartre's one-act play "No Exit." As they became increasingly depressed because of their loss of family members, fear for their own health, and loss of jobs, we read Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* and Abraham Verghese's *Cutting for Stone*, epic novels bursting with sensory details to heal and also to achieve my learning outcome related to sensuality. The virus kills the senses and quarantines are not the most exhilarating, sensuous experiences so students used memory and imagination to climb every mountain with Gao Xingjian and Verghese. As the semester came to an end, students complained about how their bodies had changed. Half of my class were global sport majors and Varsity athletes, suddenly stuck at home without weights. So Kafka's "Metamorphosis" came in handy, to help students identify with Gregor Samsa and his selfish family and evaluate what transformation meant for them. In this story, form and function, style and substance are so inextricably linked that they began connotative analysis, aware of the kinesthetic sense of Gregor the bug. Because my students were frustrated with lack of love under lockdown, we ended with Gabriel Garcia Marquez' *Love in the Time of Cholera*. They identified with the plight of lovers sabotaged by time, luck, social constraints, and human decay and had compassion for the final consummation on the cholera cruise ship. All the new options were free in Resources so students did not have to spend extra money. We were all obsessing about the Pandemic and by relating the reading list to their hopes, fears, and experience, they were able to write more.

Data Analysis

After my research associate Wenjuan Li sent out consent forms and deidentified midterms and finals, I compared the two as part of our grant project. The midterms were "Bloody Ink," the students' nickname for the Wet Ink Learning Management System, fulfilling the learning outcomes of cross-cultural comparison and contrast and synthesis of assignments to intellectual autobiography but again, connotative close textual analysis was weak. In the second half of the semester they added images of

their choice as they synthesized weekly assignments into a long paper that combined literary analysis with their intellectual autobiography. They also chose a favorite character from the readings to travel through our global buffet. This role-playing always helps them develop empathy as they inhabit another's sensory world. Unlike the midterms, their finals were punctuated with sensory images or poems to help improve the learning outcome of connotative close textual analysis. The four learning outcomes fit together as they should. When they analyze denotative and connotative language, their style improves, they inhabit the world of the books through imagination and memory, enhancing cross-cultural comparison and contrast, they empathize with characters and relate them to their lives, and the visual or poetic component helps synthesize weekly assignments into a publishable final. Three or four finals were published.

Diversity and Inclusion

Savoring a global buffet makes us appreciate the diversity of different cuisines. I love NYU because it eschews stereotypes and welcomes people of all races, creeds, sexual orientations, ethnicities, abilities, and challenges. In one class I can have students logging in from China, South Korea, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi, Buenos Aires, and all over the States, enriching our discussions with local news and their unique perspectives on the curriculum. I have attended many diversity and inclusion workshops including the Town Hall at Coles in Spring 2017 and 2018-2020 meetings with the Cross-Faculty Forum. From the way I choose a diverse global reading list, to how I communicate, assess, and empower students, inclusion is my *modus operandi* as we celebrate our differences and learn from each other. I design curricula to maximize the potential of each student by listening and empathizing with their situations and using imagination and creativity to make material appetizing and appealing to them. I have gone through formal training with various employers over the past few years but these have been my core values from the time I protested in Boston with my Black roommate, singing "If I were free" and last night at The New York Mayor's Gracie Mansion for *Black Lives Matter*. Over the past ten years, I organized cross-disciplinary events at the Global Center, NYU Bookstore, Eisner and Lubin auditorium, and other venues to celebrate diversity and connect the study of literature to global affairs, business, health, and sustainability.

Adaptations to the Screen

Adapting novels to the screen is such a logical process trying to develop plot points and match characters' through lines to the dramatic structure of the screenplay that some of its rich sensuality can be lost. Using my eBook *Carving Your Story* that uses food analogies to take a novel from its story, through character orchestration, plotting, sequencing, scene-making to the final film, students use an innovative way of reimagining a new sensual world that is different from the novel but respects its original concept. My hypothesis is that a more direct application of the food analogies to the process and structure of screenwriting from story to style would create a better full-bodied script reflecting the imaginary sensory world of the novel. Since movies are audio/visual and novels are only print, both create human stories embedded in a multisensory world, so my idea of using taste and smell is an original approach to adaptations. I began this project years ago in the non-credit division and hope to continue it in the next year.

Embodied Poetry

My approach to poetry is like music, trying to bring back tone color, rhyme, rhythm, and meter, for creative writing and literary appreciation. Because I am a fitness instructor, I link poetry to movements from kickboxing, ballet, and belly dance to understand and embody rhythm and dynamics. Embodied poetry can be taught on a Zoom or in-person as students clap or beat time to the stressed and unstressed syllables and work on melody and phrasing with the rest of the body. This approach is excellent for ESL students to improve oral communication as well as majors in creative writing and literature.

Writing Workshop II

Rhetoric and research can be dry activities, especially with quantitative assessments and statistics that turn people into numbers. Sometimes students lose a sense of the sensory reality of the people suffering from the problems they are trying to solve. In the age of the Internet and online education, research papers can look organized and comprehensive, but lack originality. Students can easily consult sources to summarize experts and even express their own opinions but it takes time for them to dig into a claim of fact to make their problem specific enough, to analyze the values of the people on both sides of this claim of fact or problem, and to come up with an original, long-term solution to the problem. Exploring the sensory world of the people, especially the homeless and those suffering from environmental or medical conditions, helps us understand their values and develop empathy for long-term solutions. Before COVID this research was done onsite although many interviews were online. Solitary field trips to take pictures can be done under COVID if students wear masks and avoid crowds.

Data Analysis

In the fall semester 2019 my research data collector deidentified midterms and finals so I could compare them after sending out IRB approved consent forms. The writing midterms excluded claims of value and field research, focusing on the conventional problem-solution or fact-policy paradigm. Their midterms were abstract without robust claims of value related to real people and situations. They had secondary sources without enough primary source research, specific claims of fact, or originality. By adding pictures of the field research and literary quotes related to claims of value for the final, they achieved a deeper understanding of the problem, reaching a wider audience. The sensory components were connected to values of the human subjects who might benefit from, implement, or thwart their proposal or claim of policy. For the finals, they were able to do their own safe field work and interviews with pictures and descriptions of the sensory world of people and their problems. By understanding and developing claims of value, students imagined and designed more long-term, substantial claims of policy. This worked particularly well for real estate papers on sustainability and the homeless and health care papers where students had access to patients in clinics. By including literary and philosophical quotes in a social science paper, they reached a wider audience for their published finals.

Health Humanities and Wellness

Health care practitioners necessarily shield themselves with Personal Protective Gear and are so busy rushing from claims of fact to policy, or problems like symptoms to solutions like treatment, that they often lack the time to assess the sensory data or interview patients to relate their conditions to their lifestyle. EMS demands immediate action, but long-term care requires long term solutions that integrate treatments into integrated wellness, going back to the favorable sensations I listed previously, that will buffer immune systems and strengthen their bodies. Health care workers need their own sensory break. It delights me to see them walking in Central Park breathing fresh air, even if only for fifteen minutes,

after the stifling, stressful, sensory-deprived world of care at Lenox Hill or Mt. Sinai hospitals. Some Eastern medicine practitioners have a history of diagnosing by smell and as a New York State licensed massage therapist, I have detected problems specialists never suspected, something I will resume when the Pandemic is over. Health Humanities and Wellness is a course that students of humanities and health care need to help them in these terrible times. My multisensory approach is different from current pedagogy in this field. Many worthy novels written by health care practitioners or about disease and dying make the reader depressed because drama, by definition, condenses time and space and compresses problems and choices to heighten conflict. Health care seeks to minimize stress but sometimes this is done so quickly that the amplitude of the problem is not understood, and the practitioners have not empathized with patients enough to help them change their lifestyles. Empathy can be overwhelming, and people need boundaries that can be achieved with humor, role-playing, role-reversal and flipped case studies, and other perspectives related to the sensory world. Patients' case histories are "objective" descriptions of symptoms, conditions, and radiographic data that are excellent tools in the diagnostic and treatment process but often depersonalize patients or miss important details that could affect more successful longer-lasting treatments or more compassionate attitudes towards death and dying. Health humanities and narrative medicine have merged the analytic tools of psychoanalysis and literary criticism to really listen to the stories of patients without judgment. Analyze case history. Ask questions. Listen. Be humble and respectful of secrets, fear, imperfections, pain, doubt, and weakness. What is the next step? Why not switch roles, in the class setting, and pretend to be the patient, saying "I" instead of "You." Let this exercise lead to potential solutions. Imagine the worst that could happen and the best. What would the practitioner as "I" do in these scenarios? Claims of policy in health care are often followed robotically as if everyone were the same. The approved protocol is great as bedrock but by imagining the best and worst, more creative solutions can be devised and then tailored to individuals. Claims of value come from analyzing the patients' lifestyles. Since wellness is dependent on healthy habits, there comes a time when descriptions give way to prescriptions. Health care workers do not want to wallow in empathy, boundaries must be kept, but the goal is to have better care and that includes integrated wellness on both sides of the treatment table. I like to bring health care majors together with majors in writing and literature. Over the past few years, enrollment in the humanities has plummeted nationwide so it is useful to ground writing and literature majors in a study of medicine and health care, not to switch majors, but to possibly write about health care or get a deeper understanding of diseases and dying to flesh out characters in their novels and screenplays. Writing and literature majors can inspire the health science majors to express themselves and improve their writing and reading skills for better communication.

I am developing a course (with a textbook) on Health Humanities and Integrated Wellness that synthesizes fitness, meditation, massage, nutrition, acting improvisation of patient case studies by practitioners, discussions among practitioners about problems related to empathy, sympathy, compassion, illness versus disease, selfish strands in the soul of care, imagining, feeling, or transcending pain, treatment versus education, efficiency versus expression, and the literary analysis of poetry, memoir, and fiction written by physicians or authors who research medicine. This course combines the humanities and the medical sciences in terms of content but in terms of pedagogy it takes a multisensory approach that is auditory, visual, extremely kinesthetic, tactile, gustatory, olfactory (many tactile practitioners like massage therapists and acupuncturists are sensitive to smells for diagnostic purposes).

Conclusion

A multisensory approach to reading and writing does not negate the translation of text to ideas, the semiotics or analysis of signs and symbols, and the need for abstract thinking. It is not my intention to let new, commercial Learning Management Systems distract students with their visuals and interaction like social media but to use them, as well as other modalities like food analogies, comparisons to other arts, onsite field research into the sensory world, linking language and the body (movement, dance, martial arts to prosody) and non-verbal communication to the study of people in research and characters in fiction. The Learning Outcomes of improving skills in thinking, reading, analyzing, creating, synthesizing, arguing, writing, and editing are paramount as well as the cultural foundation of diversity, inclusion, health humanities, aesthetic appreciation, and global communication. I look forward to continuing this research project at New York University in appropriate courses and programs online and in person.

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