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Teaching the Grateful Dead, Happenings, & Spontaneous Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

To teach a course on the Grateful Dead I developed a praxis I call "spontaneous pedagogy" that pairs academic rigor with flexible curriculum details to enable creativity and engagement among students in a truly student-centered classroom. The pairing of spontaneous pedagogy with the Grateful Dead course worked well because the subject emphasizes improvisation, which initially inspired and—during the course—paralleled my praxis. I had developed this praxis previously, implementing it each semester from 2007 to2010 for one Composition II unit on definitional arguments entitled, "The Nature of Reality." Students were asked to define what they consider as real and apply that definition to a mythological creature. Utilizing spontaneous pedagogy in this unit was successful: students gained agency in the classroom, guiding our activities towards important topics for them, and produced unique and excellent work. Following this success, I taught a topic-based intersession class (80 hours in three weeks) on the Grateful Dead in 2011, relying on spontaneous pedagogy and allowing students more agency to determine our curriculum. But something unusual happened: as the students determined the topics for class discussion, they also began assigning themselves additional homework and reading tasks, including their own essay assignments and their submission of their own oral and multimodal presentations on topics of their choosing. I found that spontaneous pedagogy in the Grateful Dead classroom achieved a truly student-centered learning experience as students willingly took over the roles of curriculum and assignment design, leaving me to prepare the classes and participate in them as a guide. In addition to the knowledge of the topic students gained in the class, they also gained a unique experience of a spontaneous atmosphere in an academic setting that paralleled a Grateful Dead improvisation or show experience.

Keywords: Grateful Dead, Geoffrey Sirc, Charles Deemer, happening, pedagogy, improvisation, epiphany, agency, spontaneous pedagogy, student-centered pedagogy

A CRITICAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING "ENGLISH COMPOSITION AS A HAPPENING" AND ITS RELATION TO THE GRATEFUL DEAD

When I was an M.A. student in the English Department at the University of Oklahoma, I was a young educator developing my classroom identity in two writing courses per semester and departmental training programs. Since I have always been inclined towards experimentation, I was also seeking out ways to make my students' educational experience unique. At that crucial moment, a faculty mentor recommended a book called *English Composition as a Happening* (2002) by Geoffrey Sirc. In his book, Sirc laments the passing of the days when incense was an atmosphere-setting pedagogical tool (alas, these were days I never knew). He notes that apparently "smoke is not supposed to be good for disc drives" (Sirc 1). The metaphor Sirc establishes using incense and disc-drives speaks to the tension he perceives in the field of composition and in higher education in general: soul searching vs. professionalization, free flowing discourse vs. imposed forms. This is a tension that I was becoming increasingly interested in addressing. To do so, I built on Sirc's happening pedagogy to develop a praxis I call "spontaneous pedagogy" that pairs academic rigor with flexible curriculum details to allow for creativity and engagement among students in a truly student-centered classroom. Spontaneous pedagogy is my own brand of the wider trend in academia towards modes of student-centered pedagogy. This article will show the process by which I enacted a spontaneous pedagogy, or a more student-centric, improvisatory approach to curriculum development in the Grateful Dead classroom. It will argue that a greater level of student-led decision-making is needed in more curriculum-based areas that surpass class discussion and could involve students determining their own assignments, readings, submission requirements and schedules, grades, projects, and presentations. The optimum articulation of my spontaneous pedagogy was realized in a 2011 topic-based course on the Grateful Dead where the method of delivery matched the improvisatory, democratic ethos of the subject. This postmodern pedagogy, focused on student-centric decision-making and autonomy, can awaken humanistic ideals of criticality and creativity that are often stifled by more regimented and professionalized courses, particularly within non-humanities majors.

According to Geoffrey Sirc, our educational institutions have become too institutionalized and endanger the possibility of our students acquiring a meaningful education that focuses beyond the emphasis on professional training that is becoming increasingly dominant on our university campuses. He sees the current landscape of higher education leaning toward professionalization, focusing almost exclusively on preparing students for their careers to the neglect of a liberal education that would encourage students to develop their humanity, strive for self-actualization, and participate responsibly as citizens of the world.[1] Sirc's analysis of higher education rang true for me as an M.A. student discovering the lay of the land for myself, and I was dissatisfied with what I was discovering. I identified the humanities and the arts as crucial aspects of an educational model that seeks to facilitate a meaningful life experience. To my mind—then, as now—fulfilled, enriched individuals are happier and more successful. As the emphasis on higher education has become disproportionately imbalanced towards professional training, English composition remains one area of requirement for all students regardless of their major. That makes composition an important realm for students to encounter the self-scrutiny and critical thinking that the English Department facilitates, which many students might not otherwise experience. For Sirc—and for me—a student's experience of composition is a pivotal opportunity in the development of their humanity as well as their writing skills. If we overly professionalize composition, we might factor out the opportunity for self-actualization represented by this last resort of the liberal education.

1 At my current institution, students in engineering and business major paths are only allowed electives as an honorary title. These majors build out the elective courses with "strongly recommended" additional courses in professional training, further disallowing the possibility of augmenting vocational training with any aspect of the humanities.

For Sirc, if a teacher can disrupt a student's conventional thought habits by whatever means necessary, that teacher offers the student an opportunity to step beyond their current state of being. As a result of their newfound heightened elegance of thought, a student might take to the task of professionalization and vocational training more easily. Sirc believes that instead of inundating uninterested students with rules and formulas, we, as teachers, should provide them with opportunities for cognitive growth. He calls for composition instructors to adopt the role of "the inspired shaman, not the pedestrian businessmen" (Sirc 74). Sirc's reconfiguration of the instructor figure from vocational trainer to shamanistic spirit guide was very appealing to me.[2]

Sirc is not alone in his judgment of the uninteresting and thus ineffective classroom procedures of business-style composition courses. Sirc's 2002 book harks back to Charles Deemer's late 1960's pedagogy manifesto: "English Composition as a Happening." Happenings, Deemer, and the Grateful Dead were all birthed out of the same primordial ooze of sixties countercultural heterogeneity. Deemer's short piece is instilled with the fiery anti-authoritarian passion of the activist-side of the 60's counterculture. It also follows the aesthetic of the Postmodern era that birthed it: Deemer presents his argument through a fragmented arrangement of original maxims juxtaposed with quotes on education from respected thinkers of the past as well as from Deemer's present. These quoted fragments include the likes of Susan Sontag, Archibald MacLeish, Marshall McLuhan, Bertrand Russell, and John Dewey. In an exemplary passage, Deemer mixes his original maxims with John Dewey quotations:

> And the university should not be a factory molding students. Campuses should not be educational 'plants,' despite the current accuracy of popular jargon.
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> *I believe that education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living.* (John Dewey, *Dewey on Education*)
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> Neither should English Composition instruct in the pleasant phrasing of nonsense. It should actually instruct in nothing, in the sense that a "teacher" reveals and a class digests. What does a "teacher" know? He is merely human.
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> *I believe finally, that education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience; that the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing.* (John Dewey, *Dewey on Education*). (Deemer 123, original emphasis)

The weight of Deemer's argument is in the interrelation of his original declarations and Dewey's quotations. Deemer draws readers to Dewey's conclusion that education should be process-based, not product-based. Since Deemer's era, the idea of process-based education has gained plenty of traction in composition studies, such

2 "Shaman" is a culturally specific word for an indigenous spiritual healer in Siberian tribes. Mircea Eliade adopted the term and applied it to other indigenous spiritual healers worldwide whose practices exhibited similar characteristics in his study, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1951). The adjectival "shamanic" refers specifically to these indigenous shamans embedded in a lifestyle and tradition of Shamanism. I use the adjectival "Shamanistic" to denote a degree of separation: to describe a practice that evokes an affinity with, but is not related to indigenous Shamanism.

that this concept was foundational to my pedagogical training.[3] To this concept of process-based pedagogy, Deemer added the new (to me) idea of a spontaneous classroom. While reading Deemer, I followed my own running juxtaposition: I was understanding him through the Grateful Dead. In addition to the similarities between Deemer and The Grateful Dead's response to their countercultural milieu —consider the electric exploratory quality of the Grateful Dead's 1967 jams—The Grateful Dead exemplify a process-based ethos in their music. The best musical improvisations are about the final destination and the course navigated to reach it in equal measure. The adventure and the excitement of the journey strengthens the importance of that destination. Deemer's call for process-based pedagogy reads, to me, as a pedagogical equivalent to the adventurous, improvisatory ethos of the Grateful Dead. That exploratory ethos would lead the band to host thousands of shows that share many similarities with Deemer's Happenings.

In his manifesto, Deemer calls for the field of composition to remodel itself on the "happening". A happening is a performance art exhibition that blurs the lines between performer and audience member. These tend to be non-linear and multi-modal. Frequently, aspects of happenings are planned in advance but without integrating any specifics. The goal of the happening is to achieve insight in the spontaneous moments they afford. A happening might interrupt the monotonous decorum of a pre-scheduled daily routine to allow for the surfacing of the cosmic, organic, organizing principle: synchronicity. For Carl Jung, who developed the idea of synchronicity, "[s]ynchronistic events rest on the *simultaneous occurrence of two different psychic states.* One of them is the normal, probable state (i.e, the one that is causally explicable), and the other, the critical experience, is the one that cannot be derived causally from the first" (*Synchronicity* 28-9 original emphasis). For example, two people pondering the same thought at the same time is an instance of synchronicity. For one person to have the thought is ordinary, but the acausal occurrence of the same thought to both is inexplicable. In this instance then, the "different" psychic state is actually the same state arising simultaneously in two different people. Synchronicity would happen often at Grateful Dead shows. As the band improvised and the music and the show experience unfolded spontaneously, band and audience members alike might experience acausal connections between the music and their own thoughts, or the thoughts or actions of two individuals, or many individuals, or myriad other permutations. In fact, the above description of a happening might be applied verbatim to a Grateful Dead show. Remarkably, the Grateful Dead were able to create the conditions necessary for a new and different happening at each one of their shows. The blurring of lines between audience and performer, and the focus on improvisation that characterizes both Grateful Dead shows and happenings are documented methods of achieving synchronistic moments.

Synchronicities are often punctuated with epiphanies, and one epiphany can teach a student a life lesson that will stick with them for a lifetime. James Joyce defines an epiphany as "a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself" (qtd. in Abrams 421). Joyce's definition emphasizes a shift in perspective to view a common, "vulgar" occurrence in a new light. This idea is paralleled in the Grateful Dead's lyric for "Scarlet Begonias" (1974), written by lyricist Robert Hunter, "Once in a while/ you can get shown the light/ in the strangest of places/ if you look at it right" (197). Hunter's deceptively simple aphorism corresponds to Joyce's definition of epiphany. In Hunter's lyric, perceiving an ordinary object or occurrence in a new way might allow one to become illuminated; a metaphor

3 Far from revolutionary by the twenty-first century, the theories of process-based education were introduced to me during my initial pedagogical training, when faculty members and advanced graduate students challenged our cohort of incoming instructors to reframe education for ourselves and our students as process-based; a move that would open up the metacognitive level of considering our own "procedural knowledge" (Hillocks 27). George Hillocks, Jr. writes, "[when] students were actively engaged in investigations or in the construction of ideas, we classify the knowledge as procedural" (35). The challenge was for each instructor to think deeply about their own ethos and embodiment to develop our own original ways of engaging students in the procedures of knowledge creation in our classrooms. Deemer's idea of bringing improvisation into the classroom via Happenings provided the spark to this line of inquiry for me and led me to spontaneous pedagogy.

for epiphany. In higher education, a moment of illumination will stay with a student well beyond their college experience. As an M.A. student, I saw the benefit of adapting a happening mode into my courses because I wished to provide my students with such epiphanic moments, though not in a Socratic way, by leading students to pre-orchestrated moments of insight as Mark Jonas notices in the patterns of Socratic dialogues (Jonas 40). I sought instead to enact a pedagogy in a style reminiscent of the Grateful Dead's: by not crowding the curriculum—The Grateful Dead rarely wrote setlists—and allowing the space for differing psychic states to occur simultaneously, arising organically as an intentional component of my praxis. In short, I wanted to allow for the possibility of synchronicity and epiphany, in addition to achieving the knowledge and skill-based outcomes of my courses.

To integrate an improvisatory happening modality into the college classroom opens up the possibilities available in that classroom, including the possibility of illumination, or epiphany. In the preface to their edited volume *The Improvisation Studies Reader*, Rebecca Caines and Ajay Hebel suggest that "the social force of improvised performance practices resides, at least in part, in their capacity to trouble the assumptions (and the expectations of fixity) fostered by dominant systems of knowledge production" (Caines & Hebel 3). Appealing as this brand of "good trouble" might be to an irreverent instructor like myself, an educational approach that instigates synchronicity in the classroom to facilitate epiphanies is largely at odds with the *modus operandi* of twenty-first century higher education. "Epiphanies," David R. Cole suggests, "have been systematically excluded from educational discourse, as they present an escape from the 'trance of the present' – and the blinkers [sic] that one dons when one constructs a scholarly argument with reference to what is already understood in a field of inquiry" (57). Yet, if we consider teaching to be an art—which I do—and we understand that the formula,

Improvisation => synchronicity => epiphany

works in spontaneous art—which it does—then it follows logically that the formula might be adapted successfully into spontaneous classroom practices. This adaptation became a goal for me in this early phase of my vocation.

The question for me thus became, how can we incorporate these two forms that seem to be very much at odds with one another: improvisational, synchronistic, epiphanic happenings and a college education of the current style that relies on a rigid structure of meticulously detailed lesson plans that sometimes stifles the very creativity and criticality we seek to engender in our students? I can only answer for myself. At the point when I encountered Sirc and Deemer, I was a few years into my vocation: a lifelong commitment to higher education. I had received unparalleled pedagogical training from one of the foremost composition programs in the country. I had the support of excellent mentors and colleagues, I had internalized the lessons I had learned about teaching, and I was interested in developing my own praxis. I had learned from my stellar mentors that the most successful educators match their praxis to their ethos, so that their lessons ring true and are reinforced by their own embodiment. The literature on college teaching I was reading corroborated these insights: "We must understand the thinking, attitudes, values, and concepts that lie behind pedagogical masterpieces, observe practices carefully but then begin to digest, transform, and individualize what we see," Ken Bains reiterates, "teachers [must] adjust every idea to who they are and what they teach" (20-21). Indeed, I realized I was in search of an individualized praxis that matched my embodiment and that truly centered students within the classroom experience. The happening approach suggested by Sirc and Deemer provided me with a foundation to create such a praxis by adopting an improvisatory approach to the art of classroom teaching.

Personally—and in my studies of art and literature—I was interested in improvisation, gravitating towards the likes of Thelonious Monk, Gertrude Stein, Jackson Pollock, Jack Kerouac, and of course, The Grateful Dead. In fact, I had hit the road to see the country—and to see "the Dead" (as they were calling

themselves at the time, with Jeff Chementi on keyboards and Warren Haynes on lead guitar)—and the improvisatory, transitory nature of a road trip paralleled for me the same quality found in an improvisational performance, which also reflected the larger perpetually shifting, improvisatory journey through life. Philosophically and spiritually, I was drawn towards non-linear and paradoxical models of thought such as Taoism and Buddhism that teach the malleability of perception and the necessity of change. And then, when all of these aggregates coalesced—pedagogical, personal, professional, philosophical, spiritual—a faculty mentor introduced me to Sirc's book. That was a fine moment of synchronicity. "There are moments," David R. Cole writes,

> as a teacher and learner when everything seems to come together. One's knowledge area, the purpose of the teaching and learning and student responses seem to blend and unify in these moments. These are pedagogic epiphanies. Suddenly, the combined weight of social concern and professional endeavour appears to lift. The job of teaching becomes easier and one's energy reserves are replenished. (Cole 57)

All of these aggregates coalesced into a pedagogic epiphany, which hit me like a lightning bolt to the forehead: "spontaneous pedagogy." Just as the Grateful Dead did not invent improvisation, I was not inventing student-centered pedagogy, but rather, was shaping my own particular inflection of it. This praxis would shape my pedagogy, and even after its fullest, most experimental application in the Grateful Dead classroom proved successful—yet unsustainable—I would retain elements of it, synthesizing them with more conventional classroom practices.

SPONTANEOUS PEDAGOGY & COMPOSING THE NATURE OF REALITY

My first undertaking in spontaneous pedagogy came at this point, and I developed a nebulous composition unit on definitional arguments. The topic was "The Nature of Reality." The unit lasted three weeks with no pre-orchestrated lesson plans and a one-question entry point in our fluid class: "what is real?" The assignment was to choose a mythological creature, and then argue whether it is real or not, supporting that claim with a personalized set of criteria that had been developed in class.[4] We spent three weeks in organic class discussions, break-out groups, and individual journaling to develop multifaceted criteria that the students would then apply to their chosen creature to define it as either real or unreal; I distinguish between real/unreal and real/imaginary because many such sets described the imaginary as real. No two class's criteria were ever the same. Some classes maintained a simple real vs. not-real dichotomy in their criteria, while others explored the shades of grey in up to seven or eight categories of reality. Each of these categories would be populated with criteria that students would use to determine the reality of their character. A few examples of criteria categories are as follows:

- Real/Not Real
- Physical Real/Imaginative Real/Not Real
- Ordinary Reality/Expanded Reality/Not Real
- Tangible Reality/Mental Reality/Cultural Reality/Not Real

Consequently, no two papers were the same. Successful students learned how to write a definitional argument as per the listed outcomes in accord with the first-year writing program.[5] Many students also learned about themselves and where they personally draw the line between what is real and what is not. I observed

4 This idea came from a previous discussion with a group of students about whether or not jackalopes are real. As it turns out, they are.

5 Academic success on this assignment—and each assignment—was measured by completion of required tasks as outlined on a rubric designed to assess students' completion of course outcomes. See Appendix A for "Nature of Reality" Definitional Argument rubric.

many students marveling at the unanticipated variation in conceptions of reality among their peers. Though I cannot be completely certain, I did not catch any students plagiarizing this assignment. How could they? In this unit, we met the prescribed outcomes of the program and students had a meaningful, introspective experience while also having a very good time.[6] As you might assume, I instantly realized the value and possibility of this approach. My method would more fully develop in the Grateful Dead classroom, which I saw as the exemplary opportunity to conduct an entire class improvisationally.

Before continuing, I will add that a widespread adoption of spontaneous pedagogy in higher education seems unlikely. Happenings are difficult to plan, especially in advance, especially for those unused to planning, or rather, facilitating them. Many are rightly hesitant to enter a classroom "without a net," so to speak. While the potential outcomes of an improvisatory method are synchronicities that lead to lasting moments of insight, inspiration, and individuation, the instructor shoulders a greater risk of falling on their face. The Grateful Dead were certainly aware of this risk in their own approach to improvisation and sometimes did fall on their faces. But their audiences were sympathetic, understanding that risk as part of the adventure. In my experience, students who are exhilarated by the adventurous classroom experience of spontaneous pedagogy are likewise sympathetic. Yet, I can imagine that the willingness to fall on one's face is a quality that is rather peculiar to my own pedagogical ethos.

Also, happening pedagogy is rather unsustainable. As Deemer writes, "Happenings happen; they are not passed down from one to another. Spontaneity is essential. Each Teacher must inspire his own happening" (124). Because each happening is unique, extra effort is required of the instructor to set the stage and retain a fluid attitude, understanding that no two happenings will take the same course. That is, no two Happenings are the same, as no two Grateful Dead shows are the same, but when that insight is extrapolated to the higher education classroom, the potential chore of reinventing the wheel for every class is inescapably apparent. That said, Deemer provides a loose set of characteristics and lists the potential boons of undertaking such a perilous endeavor:

> What I suggest is that the characteristics of the happening that reduce the distance between actor and audience, hence between 'teacher' and class; that feature shock and surprise as vehicles to raise the audience from comfort to insecurity; that result spontaneously from the 'teacher's' own subtle influence, yet never occur without the student's participation; these characteristics, I suggest, can lead to valuable educational consequences with important emphases. Unity over fragmentation; 'thinking' over 'writing'; doubt over belief; questions over answers; present over future; impulse over plan; insecurity over comfort. Life over death. (124-5)

Deemer ends his piece on this open, heady note, opting to inspire educators to think individually about how to create their own happenings. But in his book, Sirc expounds on some of the possible methodologies available to the teacher. Such an elucidation presents certain pitfalls: by describing and prescribing methods, Sirc endangers Deemer's initial point that happenings must be unique experiences that extend from the singular alignment of current conditions. Yet, suggesting illustrative precedents is helpful for those to whom improvisatory art is foreign. As potential precedents for developing our own styles, Sirc proposes the methods of artists from Marcel Duchamp to Jackson Pollock to Tupac Shakur. To this list I may add many others from my own lifetime of interest in improvisatory art, including most notably, the Grateful Dead. After my initial experiments with spontaneous pedagogy showed such favorable outcomes in the definitional argument unit, I sought out a more extended application of my developing praxis. I immediately realized the potential of offering an intersession class on the Grateful Dead, a subject where the content of the class would match the

6 Comments about the students' experiences in the course are drawn from end of semester evaluations.

spontaneous method of teaching it. Because of the affinity between method and subject, this course saw the fullest application of my spontaneous method. Since then, I have lacked the opportunity to teach subjects that lend themselves to this method, but I have continued to integrate aspects of my spontaneous method into classroom activities.

SPONTANEOUS PEDAGOGY & THE GRATEFUL DEAD: RIDING THE WAVE OF STUDENT-CENTERED CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

When I developed my Grateful Dead class, I had previous experience with intersession classes held in the three weeks between semesters.[7] Despite the abbreviated timeframe, in-class time during intersessions is the same 80 hours that is taught during a semester. In this way, intersession courses are both short-form and long-form. The experience of a class can thus be intensive as in-class time on a given day is roughly five hours: a Grateful Dead conducive allotment. I tried to plan as little as possible beforehand. My intent for day one was to show *The Grateful Dead Movie* (1977)—an historical document of the Grateful Dead experience as a happening for its focus on the participation of fans, crew, promoters, and others, in addition to the band members—and provide the class with an overview of the American counterculture from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Ken Kesey. I planned to wrap up the course with *The End of The Road* (2005) and conversations about late Grateful Dead compositions like "So Many Roads" and "Days Between" on Day 15. I had faith that in between that time, the course would dictate its own course, which, it did. At first, it was a little unnerving to step in front of a room with as many as sixty people (forty-five enrolled and fifteen or so sitting in) with so little of our course's path pre-charted, but the freedom was also exhilarating, and I was nonetheless very well prepared. In addition to my class preparation, I had been studying the Tao Te Ching, and a passage from Verse 27 had become a sort of mantra for my spontaneous pedagogy: "A good traveler has no fixed plan and is not intent on arriving" (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 127). The verse's emphasis on process instead of product, journey rather than destination encapsulated my specialized version of the cultural recalibration to process-based learning that I sought in the Grateful Dead class. I wanted to provide students with an experience, not just a knowledge set represented by a grade on paper. No one can foresee all the events that may befall them during the course of a journey, and, indeed, we could not foresee the direction that this course might take. Though the shape of the class could not be predicted, a fair amount of work went into proposing and situating the course within the context of the university's catalogue, departmental offerings, and required outcomes.

The Grateful Dead course was offered at the 3000 (junior) level through the University Studies Department. This and other intersession courses are offered *ad hoc* with the recommendation of a sponsoring department. In addition to intersession courses at all levels, this department also offers courses to help freshmen acclimate to college life, and courses for continuing education. Instructors at the professorial level may offer intersession courses listed within their sponsoring departments' catalogues that fulfill degree requirements for students. However, as an M.A. student my course was offered through the University Studies department itself—assigned the designation "UNIV"—and counted as elective credit for students. I chose to offer the course at the 3000 level to increase its appeal to many students whose degree programs required upper-division electives. Whether for this reason or simply out of interest in the topic, I cannot say, but the Grateful Dead class quickly filled to its cap at thirty but continued to experience a surge in interest. Many students contacted me via email and—because of the *ad hoc* nature of the course, as well as my impending departure for a Ph.D. program—I chose to over-enroll the course so that all interested students would have an opportunity to take it. Eventually, I over-enrolled fifteen students to create a class of forty-five.

The Department of University Studies offered me the freedom to determine the parameters and

7 I had taught intersession courses on The Beatles, and Star Wars & mythology several times.

outcomes of my course based on the malleable, diverse nature of intersession offerings. Though offered through University Studies, my intersession courses were sponsored by the English Department and exhibited the foci and methodology I was developing in my approach to cultural artifacts as a literary and cultural scholar in training. As I was looking forward to a career in literary studies, I was reading books about teaching literature at the collegiate level—including Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature* (2007) and Elaine Showalter's *Teaching Literature* (2002)—to acclimatize to my vocation. The latter provided an excellent set of outcomes for literary studies that appealed to me, and which I adapted for the course (Showalter 26-7). My list of outcomes for the Grateful Dead course was as follows:

Skills we will develop in this course:

1. How to recognize subtle and complex differences in language use and musical style.
2. How to read figurative language and distinguish literal and metaphorical meaning.
3. How to seek out further knowledge about an artistic work, its author, its content, or its interpretation.
4. How to detect the cultural assumptions underlying artistic works from a different time or society, and in the process, to become aware of one's own cultural assumptions.
5. How to relate apparently disparate works to one another, and to synthesize ideas that connect them into a tradition or an artistic period.
6. How to use artistic models as cultural references, either to communicate with others or to clarify one's own ideas.
7. How to think creatively about problems by using literature, art, and music as a broadening of one's own experience and practical knowledge.
8. How to read and listen closely, with attention to detailed use of diction, syntax, metaphor, and style, as well as tempo, key, instrumentation, dynamism, time signature, and other characteristics of musical performance.
9. How to create texts of one's own, whether imaginative or critical.
10. How to think creatively within and beyond literary and cultural studies, making some connections between the artwork and one's own life.
11. How to work and learn with others, taking art as a focus for discussion and analysis.
12. How to defend a critical judgement against the informed opinions of others.

These outcomes provided the class with a general direction and outlined the set of skills I hoped to engender in my students. Though I intended to experiment with improvisational pedagogy, adopting relatively traditional outcomes associated with literary and cultural studies ensured the rigor and direction of our study. Much work was involved with the preparatory process for this course, but relatively little of this attention was paid to determining the minutiae of day-to-day activities. The course calendar was fairly wide open to allow for our improvisational trajectory to plot our course.

Though my curriculum planning for the course was minimal, my preparation was extensive. A fallacy about improvisation is that it requires little preparation. However, I can attest to the fact that conducting a spontaneous course requires significantly more preparation than one that plots out the lessons ahead of time. This insight finds its musical equivalent in the Grateful Dead's legendarily relentless practice schedule. Hence, the type of preparation for a spontaneous course is different and more continual than for the traditionally pre-planned one. Instead of focusing on creating precise lessons before the course, and prepping for those lessons, I researched the subject in general and in depth. With no means of anticipating the topics of interest, I found that I drove myself to prepare more comprehensively than for other topic-based courses that I have taught in a more traditional mode. As the class ensued, and nodes of interest arose out of the matrix of our listening and interpreting sessions, contextual lessons, and class discussions, I would then focus more thoroughly on

those loci in my homework preparation. If a topic was raised with which I was unfamiliar or underprepared to discuss, that became my homework before the next class meeting. Because the format of the class required so much in-class time, I intentionally minimized homework for the students:

Grade Distribution

*Participation	20%
*Responses (choose 5 of 6)	40%
*Class Journal	40%
Total:	100%

The above grade distribution shows the emphasis placed on in-class work. Participation was determined by attention paid by students in class and an exit survey administered at the end of the final session. Each student was encouraged to participate in their own way. The open atmosphere of our class sessions emboldened otherwise quiet students to enter into the class conversation.[8] A large portion of the students (twenty-five to thirty) were outgoing and inquisitive, asking their questions as they arose and jotting down their thoughts in their class journals. The journal accounted for a major portion of the grade. But, requirements for the journals were loose. Some students doodled daydream visions while the music was playing, while others kept lists of facts, figures, and dates. Many were a combination of both.[9] The series of response papers were collected every couple of days, and were open-ended, informal assignments that allowed students to discuss their observations of the course material and pose any questions that they might not wish to ask in-class. As frequently happens in topic-based seminars, the insights and questions in these responses provided our in-class conversations with direction any time our discussion might hit a dead end (pun intended). Additionally, I instituted a rather draconian attendance policy to emphasize the importance of being present for the experience afforded by this class. Students were allowed one unexcused absence before their grades fell a letter. At fifteen days and five hours a day long, one absence would be the equivalent of missing five class periods on a MWF schedule. To excel in this class, one had only to have been present and engaged with the course material and their peers. Of the forty-five students in the class, one hundred percent of them passed the class. The overwhelming majority of students made A's. A handful of students made B's and C's because of absence penalties. Again, I knew that these requirements for success were minimal. But, they fit the context of marathon-length class sessions for elective credit, they facilitated the open nature of a course that would experiment in spontaneous pedagogy, and that would be approved by the sponsoring and hosting departments. What I did not and could not predict was that the majority of students (thirty to thirty-five of forty-five) would exceed these minimal requirements by a wide margin.

I brought about 120 gigabytes (roughly 55 days) of Grateful Dead music to class each day and plugged directly into the powerful sound system in our classroom: a medium capacity, oak-wainscot auditorium. At the start of each class, I would play a "warm-up" tune (chosen ahead of time) and ask the students to write independently in their journals. At the end of the song, I would ask about their writing, and as students would discuss their responses, an organic rapport would ensue that might lead us toward the topics that we had concluded with the previous day, or that might rocket us off into some aspect of Grateful Dead deep space.

We might start a discussion by analyzing song lyrics, musical compositions, historical positioning, analyzing Grateful Dead culture, and more. Each class was woven together out of guided listening sessions

8 I base this observation on the demeanor of students with whom I had previously studied, in contrast to their participation in previous classes. This demographic accounted for roughly ten students in the course.

9 These notebooks were collected for grading and then returned to the students.

(which organized themselves and happened at unscheduled but synchronistically appropriate times), impromptu class discussions, some small group conversations, break-out group time, and on-the-spot mini lectures covering far too many topics to list here, such as: allusions to myth and literature in Grateful Dead lyrics, the musicians' use of various improvisational methodologies, avant garde developments in style and technology, artistic and philosophical contexts, and sociological analyses of the Deadhead community. The topics covered were wide ranging and diverse. Literary analysis, cultural context, and analysis of musical form and approach took center stage in many of our conversations. Though the conversations were always wide ranging, tracing one robust thread might offer a glimpse into the way the class proceeded.

A recurring conversation that became a multi-week locus of our attention was the Grateful Dead's—and specifically lyricist Robert Hunter's—creation and population of a mythical neverland that hosted their roster of tales about misfits, cowboys, gamblers, monstrous creatures, and much more. As a useful shorthand, we came to call this land "Fennario." Fennario is an imaginative land named in two Grateful Dead songs: "Dire Wolf," and "Peggy-O" (Dodd 82, 217). The latter is a traditional folk tune arranged by the Grateful Dead, but with its roots in antiquity. The former is an original composition that references the place name given in Peggy-O. Locating Fennario—or even determining if Fennario is a place, state of mind, metaphor, or something else—captured this class's imagination. Because our guiding methodology was based in literary and cultural studies, we became very interested in delineating the borders of the region—which songs could be included in our sense of Fennario, and which could not? — and interpreting it. When we reached "Jack Straw" (1971), we had especially lively conversations about the characters' potential inclusion in Fennario that were complicated by the song's use of real place names: Texas, Santa Fe, Cheyenne, Wichita (Dodd 167-8).[10] Basing our observations on evidence from the text and negotiating the chorus of the differing opinions of students fulfilled many of the listed outcomes for the course. Students developed these aptitudes unconsciously during our organic conversations, and when we would hit a conversation lull, I would sometimes point out the developing sophistication of their thinking and conversation to help bring these advancements to their consciousness. This news was usually greeted with a round of warm smiles. The next wave of conversations would begin more deliberately than the last concluded ones.

Fennario often served as a touchstone for our conversations about cultural context, and the Grateful Dead's relationship to historical and artistic milieus. We also traced the Grateful Dead's relationship to their mythical landscape—Fennario in our shorthand—throughout their artistic development, e.g., in the third and final week of our class, our conversation turned to potentially oblique references to the mythical region created by the cartographer's persona in "When Push Comes to Shove" (1986). The phrasing, "Here there may be" is a refrain adopted from cartography to suggest the potential contents of unexplored regions (Dodd 334). When a student suggested that this unknown region might be the Grateful Dead's mythical region that we were calling Fennario, the class lit up like the cosmic pinball machine in the first minutes of *The Grateful Dead Movie*.[11] An observation like this is omnidirectional. Wrangling and channeling our conversation became strenuous enough to necessitate diagramming it on the board. Amid the numerous tendrils of conversation, three distinct directions became vital enough to warrant comment here: 1. The metatextual impulse of later

10 Six years later I took part in a complimentary study of imaginative geography in Grateful Dead songs with my colleagues and fellow Grateful Dead scholars Timothy Ray and Jeremy Berg via correspondence. Instead of Fennario, we adopted "Bigfoot County"—an imaginary locale from the song "Brown Eyed Women"—as the polestar of our study (Dodd 162). Our inquiry led us to imaginative locations in "Terrapin Station," "Shakedown Street," "Jack Straw," and other songs in this correspondence that led to a roundtable session at the 2018 Grateful Dead Scholars' Caucus and several other conference presentations in its wake.

11 Again, Fennario served as a shorthand to reference the mythical region in question and the accrued observations the class had made about that region. We did not tie a causal link between the two songs, but instead sketched out the resemblance between the unknown land of many Grateful Dead songs and the persona's use of cartographic language to describe an unknown land in "When Push Comes to Shove."

Grateful Dead songs to deliberately comment upon earlier ones, 2. The possibility of Fennario as an analogue for the shadowy unconscious/collective unconscious, 3. The intertextual connections in theme and imagery that bind disparate Grateful Dead songs together. All three of these themes permeated our class discussions and were, furthermore, not limited to the topic of Fennario.

Intertextual connections were drawn often, and were not limited to a single songwriter, so students gained insight from reading Hunter's lyric for "Mountains of the Moon" (1969) in tandem with John Perry Barlow's 1973 composition, "Weather Report Suite" (Dodd 74/211). This is a connection I would not have drawn myself, but it is one of the plentiful examples of the connections that we made as a class: some that I led towards, and even more that arose unexpectedly. Intertextuality extended beyond the Dead's corpus as well and became the focus of many conversations and several students' impromptu projects. As an example, the HBO series *Game of Thrones* (2011) had just begun the month before and was very popular with these students. Well-known deadhead George R.R. Martin—the author of the show's source text, *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996)—populated the iconography and plotlines of his fictional Westeros with images and allusions to the Grateful Dead. Students enjoyed teasing out these references and analyzing them. One such thematic analysis project connected the shocking beheading of the Stark family patriarch—whose sigil is the Dire Wolf—with that song's chorus: "Don't murder me/ I beg of you, don't murder me/ Please/ don't murder me" (Dodd 82). Other students were interested in a variety of other intertextual topics, and I will comment on a few more when discussing their impromptu projects.

The metaphor of consciousness exploration, noted in our conversations about the Fennario region, did not begin there. While the eventual metaphor of a mythical landscape representing the collective unconscious occurred late in the class, the exploration of consciousness relative to the countercultural milieu that spawned the Grateful Dead and integral to their exploratory ethos was a common theme from the beginning: two topics that occupied many hours of discussion in the first week of the course. Conversations about "Dark Star" (1967), for instance, steered easily into metaphorical interpretations of the imagery, key, tenor, and timbre of the music towards a reflection of and catalyst for an interior journey. This set the tone for students to continue looking for this vital theme as we continued our study, and they identified the theme in many places throughout the Grateful Dead's corpus.

That final vital thread of the Fennario conversations—metatextual commentary—did not permeate the class from the beginning like the topics of intertextuality and consciousness exploration. By its nature, this aspect of our study intensified as the course progressed, and the tendency towards metatextual commentary increased in our source texts. We began by noticing song lyrics that the band and its fans could pluck out-of-context and then apply to the music and experience. But, as we observed, this became a full-fledged deluge of metatextual songs by the end of their career. Early on, we noticed that the "Doin' that Rag" (1969) line, "Hipsters, tripsters,/ real cook chicks, sir,/ everyone's doin' that rag" could be a comment on the Grateful Dead's scene (Dodd 78). Then, students responded to hearing the Loose Lucy (1973) lyric, "Thank you for a real good time," receiving cheers from the audience—as representative of a message from the band to the fans, and fans to the band—on concert recordings from 1973 (Dodd 206). By the time we reached recordings from 1976, our reading of "The Music Never Stopped" (written 1975) interpreted the song as entirely metatextual commentary on the band, the fans, and the experience of the show which included: "It's a rainbow full of sound;" "They're a band beyond description/ like Jehovah's favorite choir;" "The music plays the band/ Lord, they're settin' us on fire" (Dodd 249). Later compositions like "So Many Roads" (1992), and "Days Between" (1993), are embedded with a retrospective pathos that students found very appealing. At this point—unexpectedly, at the suggestion of a student—we created a classification of Grateful Dead songs that we called, "The Wisdom of the Ages," and populated that category with later compositions that the students deemed appropriate. In contrast, we determined earlier songs that constituted another category, "The Wisdom of Youth." After the

next class session, a student brought me two burned CD compilations: one for each category. Though student attention to this thread started with a comment passed here and there about the Grateful Dead's reflexivity, by the time we concluded our study, it was the most dominant aspect of our conversation.[12]

I have attempted to iron out a few—but significant—threads of conversation topics that surfaced multiple times throughout our three weeks together. These conversations evolved organically and rather unexpectedly. For instance, I for one did not expect "When Push Comes to Shove" to be a significant turning point in our class's understanding of intertextuality in Grateful Dead songs. When considering their shape now, a decade after the fact, I can trace the conversation patterns more clearly than I could while in the midst of a marathon of five-hour class sessions. The shape of these conversations is much nearer to the spiral motif of a fractal than it is to a Euclidean straight line. These many spirals are all threaded together and mutually referent to each other in a way that appears simple, yet intricate; chaotic, yet organized; raucous, yet harmonious. Any person who has seen the Grateful Dead (or The Dead) perform is aware of this type of spontaneous atmosphere imbued with creative tension and never-ending possibilities pertaining to what lies around each corner. The course was thrilling in a similar way.

The class was held ten years ago and covered far too much ground far too quickly to outline all of the topics we covered. I am more interested in conveying how the spontaneous pedagogy practice facilitated an experience of the class that transcended an ordinary topic-based seminar. The class paralleled the adventurous, improvisatory experience that one encounters at a Grateful Dead show, or while listening to a Grateful Dead song, and so the method of delivery for the course and the course material itself synced up and provided the opportunity for a sustained aesthetic experience, if not an even more profound experience.[13] The line between performer (teacher) and audience (students) was blended, unforeseen multimodal elements were integrated, and no one in the classroom knew what lay around each corner. The experience was riveting, and even though the class time was an exhausting five hours, we often stayed a half hour or more after our scheduled end time. The students did not just learn about the Grateful Dead via dry and distant course material; instead they encountered the feeling of the subject and felt the flow of momentum and energy to which the Grateful Dead were so famously attuned. And, as I had hypothesized, the improvisations led to synchronicities, and the synchronicities led to epiphanies.

The exhilarating, experimental, and improvisational quality of the course was a function of our lack of a predetermined curriculum to use as a road map for exploring the multifaceted subjects that Grateful Dead studies encompass. So, we charted our own course through the multivalent source material including diverse topics, the study of which defies disciplinary boundaries. But our free-flowing explorations were engendered by the rigorous approaches of traditional scholarly exegesis. The Grateful Dead demands to be addressed through scholarly approaches from academic disciplines as diverse as sociology, ethnomusicology, music theory, religious studies, philosophy, literary studies, and more. Though the variety of lenses we adopted to study the subject matter differed in their particulars, we did not stray far from the traditional conventions of critical analysis. Once we would land on a particular topic, our method of exegesis would exemplify the three-step approach to critical inquiry that Granville Ganter traces back to William Perkins' late 1500's manual for crafting better sermons, *The Art of Prophecying*. Ganter elicits from Perkins' recommendations a three-step model of critical inquiry and analysis. "[*A*]*nalysis*," Ganter writes,

> refers to the technique of critically interpreting an idea or problem by breaking it into

12 In 2011, I hired an off-duty notetaker (from the University of Oklahoma Athletics Office) to sit in on the course and document its proceedings. She had her work cut out for her as our conversations were frequently lively, but she did a good job of documenting the direction of class sessions and the gist of what was being said. The details of class proceedings related here are drawn from those notes.

13 Between ten and fifteen students reported such experiences in their course evaluations. More have done so in conversation and private correspondence.

> meaningful parts. I emphasize *meaningful* parts because the skill is not simply defined by expertise in division and classification: it's about explaining why those parts are important in respect to different contexts and circumstances. Interpretive analysis is both a *habit of thought* (a cognitive trick) and a *rhetorical protocol* (an expressive structure in speech or writing). In either case, it's the intellectual machinery of conceptual exegesis (Ganter 64 original emphasis).

The combination of traditional approaches to critical analysis with our experimental method of curriculum development allowed us the freedom to address any topic that interested us at the time it arose without sacrificing the rigor of our scholarly inquiry. In effect, the course realized the solution to the problem posed above in this narrative: how to blend the spontaneous happening method and its—unlisted on the syllabus but nonetheless desired—epiphanic outcomes with the priorities and outcomes approved by the university and its sponsoring departments. I came to realize that, for me, spontaneous pedagogy meant relinquishing curriculum planning (or overplanning) while retaining traditional modes of scholarly inquiry and analysis. Students quickly became comfortable with this pairing, and relaxed visibly in the classroom. As they relaxed, many more engaged in class discussions than they ordinarily would, and on the whole, they seemed to feel emboldened by the return of their agency to determine the direction of the class.[14] To support their choices, I found that students would engage in additional work. Though perhaps unconscious on their part, I found this trend remarkable. It validated my choice to rely on their decision making.

The pairing of traditional modes of analysis with free-flowing curriculum design lent itself to an unforeseen and truly unique aspect of the course: student's assigning and completing their own non-assigned (by me) assignments. Again, the in-class time was an intensive five hours, so at the outset of the class, I opted to minimize the homework I assigned in the course. I brought a small library of scholarly and historical works focusing on the Grateful Dead and students checked them out daily. Please note, these were not assigned readings, but readings that the students assigned to themselves. The trend started gradually, but as more topics were discussed in class, more students found some aspects of the Grateful Dead interesting enough to assign themselves readings. The spirit became infectious and overtook the entire class. No one student read all of them, but each found their own interests and pursued them throughout the class. Of their own accord, in the absence of assigned homework, students wrote research papers, created multimedia research and art projects, and gave presentations about the material that they researched. These projects took on many diverse formats.

Previously, I mentioned the tendency among these students towards analyzing *Game of Thrones* in connection with the Grateful Dead. Several students completed projects on this topic. Another vein of student interest was the connection between the Grateful Dead, Western culture, and country music; after all, this course was held in central Oklahoma. A few projects fell within this trend: students alternately excavated the Grateful Dead's musical relationship to country music, and the proximity of Hunter and Barlow's lyrics to the imagery of Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns. One paper created an evaluative argument (learned during their composition II course) in which the student argued that the Grateful Dead's country music was more legitimately "country" than much of the music played on country radio according to criteria they had created for what makes music "country." An environmental science major wrote an essay about the ecological vision of the Grateful Dead in "Box of Rain," "Let it Grow," and "We Can Run," analyzing them according to what they were learning in their major courses. Multiple presentations were held about projects where the students had investigated the Grateful Dead in relation to the context of the psychedelic 1960's counterculture, including applications of Timothy Leary and Terence McKenna's writing to the Grateful Dead's approach to music, and an investigation into the status of Neal Cassady as countercultural hero. A music major performed

14 I base this observation on two factors: 1. The in-class conduct of roughly ten repeat students and my observations of the general dynamic of the classroom as the course progressed. 2. Course evaluations

a complicated piece for us inspired by the irregular time signatures and key changes that we observed in songs like "Unbroken Chain," "Estimated Prophet," "The Eleven," and others. A contemporary dance major performed a dance to a medley of Grateful Dead songs. Even more memorably, an art major created a live painting experience during one of our concert-video viewing sessions. This was lively, to say the least. The projects and presentations were eclectic and entertaining, and yet, were entirely unnecessary for success in the class. Because our schedule was fluid, we could easily accommodate the inclusion of these presentations at any point a student finished one. And these presentations organically offered direction to our curriculum. Additionally, students turned in well-written research papers, and they encouraged me to provide substantial feedback on their works. In response I encouraged them to share their findings with the class via presentations, which many of them did. Again, because this is unique in my fifteen-year experience as an educator, it bears repeating that in the absence of assignments, the students in this class created their own assignments and produced their own projects. This amazed me. I have never experienced anything like it, and probably will not again.

Throughout the course, the students' thirst for more knowledge was palpable. They devoured historical and scholarly works on the Grateful Dead, they stayed late to listen, watch, and analyze sprawling half-hour improvisations that I started five minutes before class ended, and they poured their energy into their projects and presented masterfully on diverse topics utilizing eclectic methods, each indicative of students' interests and personality. The best part is that all of this was unessential. They asked relevant questions, and we had many lofty conversations. Many days they brought in friends, and some days we had fifteen or more visitors sitting in. Some people that had never enrolled came to every class session. The class transcended its classification as three hours of upper division elective credit. The students showed up to learn and to be pushed—and push themselves—forward and upward.[15] This experience galvanized us as a group in a way that is atypical in my experience as an educator. A disproportionately high number of these students have kept in touch with me in the intervening years. I have since run into these same students at Furthur, Phil Lesh & Friends, Bobby Weir, and Dead & Company shows, and I have gone to see their own bands perform. Some of these bands began after class ended and have incorporated what they learned of the Grateful Dead into their improvisation techniques. I keep in pretty regular touch with some of them, and I even directed the course online through a Facebook chat with a student that was out of the country for our class meetings (not for credit).[16]

Two days after the class ended, 40 of the 45 students were set to attend a music festival: that cultural mainstay in the new millennium that was spawned from the Grateful Dead themselves. Intriguingly, Dark Star Orchestra, a prominent Grateful Dead "re-creation" act, was scheduled for a show at this particular festival. But unfortunately, Dark Star Orchestra was scheduled at the same time as Bassnectar and Pretty Lights: two very popular acts among these students at the time. Throughout the class, I would jokingly suggest that the students attend the Dark Star Orchestra show instead of Bassnectar and Pretty Lights. Our banter on this subject became a sort of refrain punctuating the end of our class sessions. They agreed, but I was skeptical. Of course, they were not liable to me in any way. When class was over and grades were entered, they were obligated to me only in good faith. Interestingly, that night I received a photo text of about twenty of them at the Dark Star Orchestra show. This was a happy teaching moment.

In conclusion, I would like to leave you with an anecdote that speaks to me of the importance such a spontaneous class experience held to a single student in the grand scheme of the over-institutionalized

15 I offer this comment as an observation, on my part, of the earnestness with which students engaged in the proceedings of this class.

16 I have run into more than twenty of these students at concerts. Two bands have formed out of this group of students. One of those bands continues to play a decade later. I am in regular communication with about fifteen of these students. A smaller portion (five or six) have become close friends. I officiated the wedding ceremony for one student in 2016.

education monolith against which Deemer and Sirc write. Later in the year after the class [2011], I happened upon a student in public with their family. Their older brother pulled me aside and told me that this student had been barely maintaining a 2.0 average before the Grateful Dead class and had been battling with their parents about dropping out (all news to me). The brother thanked me because, after the Grateful Dead class, this semester, the student had straight A's, no longer wanted to drop out, and had rekindled his interest in the passion he initially went to college to pursue: cinematography. This student graduated the next year with a degree in cinematography. This one instance is indicative of several more similar conversations I have had with both students and their families - a testament to the importance of the epiphany, produced by the spontaneity of the moment, in the individual student's overly professionalized path through higher education. The importance of self-actualization is practical and directly benefits a student's ability to excel in the rest of their studies, and onward throughout their lifetime. In this most radical application of my spontaneous pedagogy, my students and I discovered its transformative potential. As the Grateful Dead is much more than the sum of its parts, so too was our experience of our Grateful Dead class. That is-ness or thus-ness remains ineffable, indescribable. But the experience of it, and the memory of that experience remains with me and with the students. When I reconnect with some of them—as happens often—our conversation includes the knowledge that they gained in the class and have built on since, the experience of the ineffability that spontaneous methodology afforded them, and our wondrous remembrance of how that experience paralleled the adventurous improvisatory spirit of the Grateful Dead.

BEYOND SPONTANEITY: LET THE STUDENTS TEACH THEMSELVES

The university experience that a student receives should include more than rote vocational training because people are more than their professions; people are spiritual beings. Sean Gehrke and Darnell Cole affirm that,

> Spirituality is fundamental to students' development. College students, in fact, are often preoccupied throughout their university experience with the "big questions" in life, which are essentially spiritual in nature—"Who am I?," "What are my most deeply felt values?," "Why am I in college?," and "What kind of world do I want to help create?" (225)

Though these questions are on students' minds in college, the majority of their education is geared towards professionalization. Aside from English composition and a required gen-ed course in philosophy or psychology, students are rarely afforded the opportunities to address these "big questions." I found that addressing these issues became a part of the process for students in my Grateful Dead class as a result of the implementation of my spontaneous pedagogy, which is ultimately just my own particular brand of a student-centered learning model, inspired by my attention to the improvisational artists I love, including and exemplified by the Grateful Dead. Gerhke and Cole chart out the characteristics of student-centered learning models, suggesting that they "emphasize students' active pursuit toward discovery, group work, self-assessment, complex problem solving, and student-faculty interaction outside of class, as well as faculty pedagogical goals pertaining to spiritual development of their students" (227). All of these characteristics apply to the method I developed based on my attention to Sirc, Deemer, their happening pedagogy, and my lifelong love of improvisatory art. But even more, spontaneous pedagogy—paired with the students' extreme interest in the subject matter—afforded them an opportunity for curriculum development and, as a surprise to me, the creation and completion of unassigned assignments. In this way, the actualized outcomes that I observed in my Grateful Dead class went far beyond my intended course outcomes.[17]

17 The students who were involved have expressed the value of this learning experience to me in many different ways over

Through this process I observed many students achieving ineffable moments of epiphany[18]: those types of intangible moments that allow students insight into their own answers to the "big questions" they are asking themselves. And because they were able to achieve these moments of self-actualization, they became more successful in their academic training for their chosen professions. My experience with the Grateful Dead class cemented for me a commitment to student-centered learning models and reinforced my firm belief in the ultimately practical impact that humanities education has on a non-humanities student's professional development. Writing about the shifting landscape of higher education in the twenty-first century, Carol Bliss challenges college educators to adapt to the new challenges and benefits of the information age:

> In historical models of education, the professor was master, and students were receptive learners, dependent upon absorbing advanced degrees of knowledge that, typically, only professors could impart. With the advent of the Internet and the Information Age…The role of teacher is becoming fundamentally different. A professor is no longer simply a repository of knowledge, but rather a gatekeeper, pointing students toward areas of exploration, encouraging the connection of ideas, synthesizing information, and turning new learners on to the discovery of deeper meaning and larger questions. Education has changed, and these changes present important opportunities. (1)

Enacting personalized practices of student-centered pedagogy praxis—like spontaneous pedagogy—reframes the educational experience for our students, challenging them to chart their own course. Students may very well be their own best teachers, as long as a caring guide journeys along with them on their path to discovery.

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the course of this decade. First and foremost, I am relying on responses to the exit poll I handed out on the last day of class and on the students' responses to the institution course evaluations. After that, I am relying on anecdotes related to me directly by students and their friends, and direct communications from students who have sought out a way to express the importance of the experience to them. Perhaps it's a synchronicity: most recently, while working on this article, a student emailed me last week (July 2021) to express his gratitude and the impact the class made on his life.

18 Between ten and fifteen students confirmed epiphanic experiences in their course evaluations and correspondence with me.

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APPENDIX A: "THE NATURE OF REALITY" DEFINITIONAL ARGUMENT RUBRIC

How I will grade your Definitional Argument:

An appropriate amount of summary: Your essay requires you to summarize the cultural and personal context of your mythological creature to give the reader a better understanding, but it should not be the majority of your essay. This might include origin stories from myth, popular culture, or personal anecdotes. A good summation is concise and focused on context more than information: _____/15

Judgment: Your essay should have an overall judgment of your creature as real or not. This judgment is then broken down by individual criteria to show how you came to form your overall judgment. This judgment is your informed opinion about the reality of your creature. It should be balanced and fair: _____/15

Criteria: Your judgment needs to be based on the criteria you have developed to evaluate the reality of your creature. You may use our class-wide criteria or a more personalized set of criteria. These criteria should be stated and commented on throughout your paper. Criteria and evidence form the majority of your evaluation: _____/15

Evidence: For each criterion, you will need specific evidence to back up what you are saying. This means grounding your observations and judgment in evidence which supports each criterion. This should be exact and formulated for each and every criterion: _____/20

Effective Structure: The paper is organized in a clear, logical way. Paragraphs stay focused on singular topics and transition from one idea to the next throughout the paper: _____/15

Images: Images and captions work as examples to help further the essay's main claims: ____/10

Editing and Proofreading: The paper adheres to MLA format and is relatively free of grammar errors and typos: _____/10

Total: _____/100 Additional Comments:

AUTHOR BIO

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