

Innovate, facilitate, participate

March 4-6: more than 20 educators gather at Harvard for becoming Pre-Texts facilitators.

It's a Wednesday afternoon at the Derek Bok Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts. A narrator reads out loud a page from *The Vortex*, a visionary 1924 novel by José Eustasio Rivera that denounces the exploitation of rubber gatherers in the Amazon jungle. I scribble spirals on scrap cardboard as I listen intently, while many other educators, teachers, and scholars of various disciplines do the same around the table.

This is my first encounter with Pre-Texts, a pedagogical protocol intended to engage students of all ages and levels in creative and inquisitive full contact with challenging texts. I experience first-hand the benefits as a student: first interrogating a text that looks intractable, and then making sense of it thanks to creative activities and collective reflection with peers. Throughout the first session facilitated by Doris Sommer and Thomas Wisniewski, I become familiar with the protocol even before realizing it. A facilitator proposes activities instead of requiring work; competition gives way to collaboration; we find pleasure in tackling challenging tasks creatively; and we reflect critically on what we did.

Each activity multiplies the points of access to the text. At the end of the first session, we are invited to become facilitators who propose new activities that we will lead ourselves, and to bring a “tangential” or related text the following day. Such is the model of Pre-Texts: instead of being interrogated by the teacher, students become interrogators of the text, getting to the core of the pedagogical interaction – the ideal starting point for developing a high level of literacy.

During the second and third sessions Doris and Thomas stepped back and new participants took turns to facilitate the activities we proposed, this time with a different text. Since a prompt from the first day was to “go off on a tangent” from the Colombian novel, I brought Canto 13 of Dante’s *Divina Commedia* in which Dante breaks off a twig from a tree that cries out with a human voice that it had been a man. It seemed the likely inspiration for Rivera’s scene in which the hero hallucinates that he cuts a tree which turns out to be his metamorphosed lover, who complains of the cruel wound. We played with Dante that day, for example as Martine Jean led us in making maps of the forboding forest between the river crossed and the sand patch. No one needed to use the literary critical language of “intertextuality” to appreciate the connection between Dante and Rivera, because the literary theory was in the reading practice: texts cite other texts and produce a density of meaning.

On our third and final day, Alicia – the heroine of *The Vortex* and now a reference to Dante’s Canto -- inspired Maria Bovea’s tangent from *Alice in Wonderland*. It was the scene in which she changes shape, the way characters changed shape – into trees – in the previous readings. We played Lewis Carroll’s scene through the Forum Theater Activity that Finlay Bell had prepared to explore Dante’s dilemma. Finlay was concerned at first that his preparation would not suit the shift of focus toward the panic Alice felt when she shrank so small that she couldn’t recover her key. But the facilitator rose to the challenge and discovered that the activity could be tailored to different texts, and that in general Pre-Texts is a protocol “empty” of content. Activities are not tethered to a text; they are chosen for the interpretive pleasures that a facilitator chooses to develop and that can respond to practically any text.

Each Pre-Text activity is efficacious in making us read and re-read a text with curiosity, and thereby with a deeper understanding than would be possible if we simply received the text. Participants make art and discuss our own decisions, prepared to examine the core text’s rhetorical dimension and its relation to current, burning issues. We consider possible ways of using Pre-Texts

for covering an academic program. What I am most amazed at is the flexibility of the protocol, which proves apt for teaching literature, but also language, translation, and other text-related subjects. Any subject, in fact: from history, philosophy, and sociology to STEM, including multilingual teaching environments.

By the end of the workshop we were all comfortable users of the protocol, and ready to implement it in our respective work at the service of students. In fact, Timo Johnson had already begun. He told us that he implemented parts of the Pre-Texts protocol with his adult English language class that Friday morning. It worked, he was pleased to say, for classroom management. Until then students had been allowing a charming but overbearing colleague to dominate the class. With Pre-Texts, air-time was controlled to a fair proportion with the standard prompt that each participant speak before anyone speaks again. By the next sessions, Timo would tell us later, the English language learners volunteered to read aloud and they generally adopted the Pre-Texts protocol to ask questions, propose activities, and to reflect. He was working less while they were learning more.

As a scholar of Italian literature and a passionate educator I look forward to experimenting with Pre-Texts with my language and literature students next semester, as well as with K-12 refugee students over the summer, if measures against covid-19 allow.

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