

# RLL IN THE CLASSROOM

Featuring RLL instructors, teaching resources,  
and other events of interest

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## Welcome Back!

Welcome to RLL in the Classroom! This is the February edition of our new monthly newsletter, designed to highlight the great teaching going on around RLL, share ideas and resources, spark discussion, and build community around teaching in the department.

We hope you enjoy!

Juan Arias and Luca Politi  
Bok Pedagogy Fellows in RLL





## Spotlight of the month

MASSIEL TORRES ULLOA

Each issue of the “RLL in the Classroom” newsletter features a spotlight interview from a current TA or TF in RLL. For the February interview, Juan and Luca had the pleasure to sit down virtually with Massiel Torres Ulloa, a fourth-year TF in Spanish.

Among other topics, Massiel shared about her experiences teaching Boston based houseless youth, inspiring her to take the “classroom” beyond the traditional spaces. Massiel reflects on the January @GSAS mini-course that she co-taught in 2021 and the design and teaching principles that led to its success for all the participants.

Massiel wrote down her responses to our questions. The interview is reproduced below and was slightly edited for clarity and length. We hope that by reading the interview, you can find inspiration for your own experiences “in the classroom.”

**Massiel, we would like to start by giving you a chance to introduce yourself. How would you describe yourself to the audience of RLL in the Classroom? What projects are you currently working on?**

You ask this, and I already see myself facing a group of eager yet shy students on their first day of class. As a matter of fact, I am a bit reserved about introducing myself in that first session with my students. My goal is to facilitate connections across them to model prioritizing community over the authority that I, as a teacher, could come to represent. I think that is the essence of a learning community. I tell them: I am Massiel Torres, a fourth-year Ph.D. candidate in Spanish; I work on Caribbean Philosophy; I like painting; I have a pet turtle. They’re usually more interested in my pet turtle than anything else. Still, I love her, so I make sure she makes an appearance on the PowerPoint.

**“I don’t see the classroom as separate from other political work. I am a worker concerned with the ‘revolutionary’ imagination”**





I do unravel throughout the semester. As it becomes relevant, I let my students know other parts of my work and life. Lately, my dissertation has made it into the forefront. Last semester they asked me what it was about, so I shared my catchphrase: “a defense on doing nothing productive for the nation-state.” I wish you could have seen what they did with it that day. I see it popping up more as I work on my first chapter, both an exciting and frightening stage.

But beyond the catchphrase, and through an anticolonial Afro-Caribbean gender studies lens, my dissertation explores how the frictions of colonized desire inform ways of conceptualizing and seeing liberation, especially as connected to the revolutionary process even before this evinces itself. I do this by looking at Caribbean texts that depict communities, lives, and performances of the everyday connected to urban waterscapes. I believe that to think about water is to think about relationship—the unit for social change, at least as I have seen both through my experiences in learning communities and in organizing politically.



**We know you were involved in teaching during your time in college and that these experiences solidified an interest in teaching and research. Could you describe more about this background?**

Yes, I have been teaching for the last six years. I started to teach as a Junior at Emerson College. I enrolled in a class taught by poet Cheryl Buchanan, who also graduated from their MFA program some time before. Cheryl’s class was very unique in the sense that it almost worked as a prototype for the non-profit she’d go on to found some time later, Writers Without Margins. In her classroom, we received a significant wake-up call. Cheryl wanted to take us beyond the classroom and make a classroom there. Before coming to Emerson, Cheryl had been a lawyer, so she had a particular interest in social injustice and saw a door towards advocacy and transformation in literary creation. This connection was something I intuited but never had the chance to explore before. Part of our class was spent conducting a writing workshop for older adults at a facility in Dorchester. I stayed there for two years more. I started as a tutor working individually with a writer and then became workshop leader when Cheryl started her non-profit. I worked for them all through 2020 when the pandemic hit.

**Cheryl Buchanan, Massiel's mentor at Emerson College and founder of Writers Without Margins**



Another group that I had the privilege of working with was what we named the “Underground Writers Collective.” This was a workshop at Bridge Over Troubled Waters, a youth services agency working with houseless youth in the Greater Boston Area. Youth are incredible. Bridge youth are overflowing with brilliance and stories. Many were artists already producing jaw-dropping work and were published very quickly. By the time I worked there, I was already working for another Boston-based youth organization. I had learned, quite the hard way, that youth can be challenging to engage even under serving conditions. So we tried everything. Working with writers at the “Underground” taught me to teach through anything and swiftly attend to changing needs in the learning environment. Also taught me how to emotionally regulate and deal with distress in learning environments. Many of my students at Harvard describe my classrooms as “mellow.” I owe everything to the classrooms we created at Bridge every week.



**Harvard University**  
**· Ethnicity, Migration, Rights**

**You’ve taught in different settings and departments during your time at Harvard. Could you share about the courses and topics you’ve had a chance to engage with as a TF?**

Some peers mistake my actual department constantly because of this! I have taught at RLL, the Divinity School, EMR (Ethnicity, Migration, Rights), and Folklore and Mythology. During my first semester as a TF I co-taught my first Spanish class, SPAN 11, with Jorge Mendez Seijas, an incredible teacher who showed me the online ropes! I also taught with Mayra Rivera on her “Coloniality, Race, Catastrophe” course. We are leading the class together again this semester! I helped reshape the course as a research assistant for the online format in 2020. Mayra is such an excellent teacher and mentor, so I am not going to lie and say I am not over the moon about teaching it again.

The more I work with faculty, the more I can tune my teaching, especially in ways that complement the careful and loving labor they do in the classroom. This is how I felt about working with Marcelo Montalvo-Garzo on “Intro to Latinx Theory,” Eleanor Craig on “Power, Knowledge, Identity,” and Lowell Brower on “Supernatural Storytelling.” I will never forget the commitment to radical teaching that these three have shown me, especially regarding fostering pleasure and joy in the classroom.



**In addition to your teaching as a TF, you also developed and led a January @GSAS minicourse with Maia Doig-Acuna in 2021. What was the topic? How was the experience different from leading an undergraduate course or section during the regular term?**

The mini-course was such a dream. I adored every second of it. From putting it together to teaching it with Maya, it was just even better than we could have ever imagined. Maya is a beautiful writer. When I saw the mini-course ad, I couldn't think of a better person to co-teach with, and I was not wrong. We quickly agreed that our writing workshop would focus on Black and Afro-descended thinkers' writing and intellectual practices. We wanted to explore how they exercised resistance against commodification by narrating from and construing the self as an archive.

We capped the class at 12 and ended up with 16 committed writers and readers showing up to discuss everything between critical fabulation and Beyonce's Formation. One of the things that quickly struck us was how the class formed a sense of community that we did not think would be possible online, especially among strangers that seemingly had nothing in common. I think it had to do with the fact that there was no point in being in the space beyond being in the space, in relation with each other, learning from and with. There were no grades, no certificates, nothing tangible nor practical to be gained to show nor reward that effort had been invested.

Although I think that Maya and I are lovely people and that we do very well as facilitators, I agree with her that what made the mini-course so unique was a genuinely material-driven space. I mean by this that the texts we read informed an ethics of interconnectivity and creation as liberatory. They took seriously the quest of those who have no history, no healing, no search but each other, and that was such a beautiful and saddening and uplifting and joyous journey. I will forever remember a moment when after a very intense discussion on Morrison's "Site of Memory" one writer was moved to tears. The vulnerability of coming together in grieving was not irrelevant to the material; it was actually the point. And there was a joy that exuded the space after we were able to care together for the grieving. It can be difficult to reproduce these learning methods in the academic classroom, mainly because this vulnerability could quickly harm the community if not properly served-I don't mean the eruption is the harm. The recognition of an unaddressed need is the harm

**"There was a joy that exuded the space after we were able to care together for the grieving"**



**It's clear that for you teaching can be a team-oriented pursuit, involving the perspectives of co-teachers, students from different walks of life, but also voices from the surrounding community. In fact, the word community came up many times during our conversation (working with local communities, community building, online communities). Could you expand on the role that of community or communities in your teaching?**



**Audre Lorde, author of the essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" (1978)**

It's everything. I learned this very early on in life. I grew up in a working-class household in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. I always had multiple caregivers outside of my family unit. I thought for the longest time that this was purely a Dominican phenomenon. As a scholar, I now know that this way of organizing life is Afro-diasporic. This is the way of life of a people that had to find kin amongst strangers under a devastating process. And in strangers, in these new communities, were able to find the strength to create both personal and national freedoms. A community, for me, is the site of imagination and the place where the self comes into being by relating.

I love Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic" because it's about relation just as much as Glissant's Poetics. Lorde reminds us that in the body, in feeling, we can find a clue to unmediated, hidden, ancestral forms of knowledge that are liberatory. But what has the body to do with the classroom? Caribbean frameworks would tell us everything: the body needs to become habituated to the self. This means that one becomes oneself, actualized, only in community with others. I use community as the verb here because in itself, it is a ritual of being, but also does not require any particular performance other than the willingness of inhabiting one's body in the presence of others--being truly present if you may. I also love this language, "inhabiting one's body." It was Maya who shared it with me, and I saw it explored by Kevin Quashie in his newest book. He thinks of existence in relation as "inhabitation."



I want my students to inhabit themselves. To find a home in themselves in community. I think that is where the most innovative, impressive, and rigorous learning comes. Because it comes from a site of love. I do not mean love the feeling. I am taking bell hooks' quest seriously here. Love as in the action of extending oneself for the growth of another. Love in the classroom looks like radical acceptance of varying conditions. Sometimes you and your students come with your A+ game, and that's wonderful. But often, and this mid-semester, you're trying to get by. And that guarantees a conversation. How are we feeling? What are we thinking? Would perhaps moving our bodies help us recenter? I've conducted sessions in the Center for European Studies garden because staying in a basement during a beautiful, sunny day felt like a disservice to my students. They did not want to leave the classroom we created that day.



"Staying in a basement during a beautiful, sunny day felt like a disservice to my students".  
Massiel's class in Harvard's Center for European Studies garden.



**What other practical tips do you have for encouraging and maintaining this sense of community among the students and instructors, both in the class and even after the course concludes? Would you like to share any experiences you helped foster in that regard?**

Number one most important is to learn ALL of your students' names and to make it a requirement to meet with you at least once in the semester. You want to establish a rapport with your students to feel comfortable speaking to you if they need extra help or are struggling.

On the topic of confidence: you can never be over-prepared, but you can be overworked. Try as much as you can to not overwork yourself. An overworked facilitator will bring a lot of energy that will not serve the space, nor foster a sense of community for students. You might even be irritable. I know I have been. And the goal is not to crash, but to run things so smoothly that your students can forget about you. That should be your goal. When I say to strive to become forgettable in the classroom is that students should relate horizontally, not vertically, to authority. This helps you do a few things safely: it enables you to push them to the slight discomfort zone where growth happens because they rely on each other and not you alone for support and validation; they self-regulate and self-discipline because the learning process reinforces agency. It is sad that students will apologize for simply existing inside the classroom. This is trauma.

They apologize for fidgeting because before, someone or many teachers before me punished them for not looking “conventionally” attentive. Attentiveness looks different for all. I know this myself. I can be a bit of an anxious learner and need to fidget to recenter myself.

Be excited about your students! You can model joy and excitement in the classroom by engaging sections and classes like conversations amongst learners. Sometimes when the topics feel too difficult to breach, I like to ground them with specific examples. Pop culture and even your every day is super helpful here. In one section, we had to talk about Chandra Talpade Mohanty's multiculturalism and pedagogies of dissent, and I opened the conversation by showing students a photo a colleague had sent me of Walgreens curly hair care, which has a big sign that reads “multicultural hair.” This diversity of doors for understanding allows younger learners to feel more confident and ready to talk in the classroom, which might be difficult at first in mixed-level classes like we have at Harvard.

Another thing I learned this semester from Lowell Brower in “Supernatural Storytelling” was to get students working in smaller groups but making fun activities. Everyone loves a good quest. Especially if that quest was designed by peers. In class, student presenters closed the evening with activities inspired by the class materials and topics of the week, which inspired me to create my own quirky section activities. One week I had them write yelp reviews to our monsters of the week: Zombies, Vampires, Witches, and Popobawa.



I have been super lucky that professors encourage me to see their classes through my expertise and conduct sessions that way. But I also do like giving students the last word about their learning. I usually create a teaching plan that any Ph.D. teacher could follow and another plan grounded on my particular lenses and questions. Last semester I did this for my two classes. They consistently asked for option 2. And by the way, option 2 does not mean conducting a paper presentation. You have to condense relevant details into digestible snippets that promote thinking interconnectively. This is great because you're learning to communicate with a diverse learning audience, and your students are being let into the scholarly process, which sometimes might seem obscure and difficult to access for them.

**From our conversation, your teaching approach seems to be connected with your research project on revolutions in the Caribbean. How would you describe the connection? How would you say one informs the other?**

When it comes to revolutions, I am interested in the aspects of life construed as a betrayal to the revolution. The classroom is my preferred place of work because it is the privileged sanctuary for learning for our westernized cultures, although learning can happen anywhere, anytime. But the classroom is a contentious space, especially the humanities classroom. It is not immediately practical, and at least as I practice it, it does not have to be. I feel that the "practical" is the standard measure of freedom in our current mode of life. To go against it is a betrayal of the most dangerous order. This is why we see pieces like Tompkins' "The Shush" coming out in PMLA. The humanities classroom must be both current and a betrayal to the contemporary because, within its pedagogical walls, new ways of being can be envisioned and practiced. This is also revolutionary.

I owe way too much to everyone I have ever learned from and with. In learning, I found abundance, the same abundance of care that my home raised me with. As a college student, I quickly began to see the connection between education and healing, especially when expansion was required. There was something about giving free rein to creativity that made people's eyes shine brightly. I think it has to do with something that Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley used to say to us all of the time during her time at Harvard: "the dignity of imagining for the sake of imagining" no more, no less. My research has taught me that what catastrophic processes seek to steal from people is their conceptions of the beautiful, the sacred, and how these inform culturally specific ways of imagining futures. In every classroom I inhabit, I seek to re-establish not a sense of the sacred nor beauty lost but to create one that adjusts to the group's experiences, knowledges, and interests.



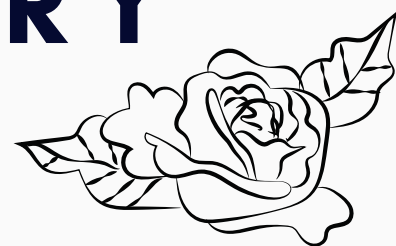
**How do you balance the two motivations of community advocacy through the arts/public humanities on the one hand, and learning for the sake of learning, imagining for the sake of imagining, which also seems to guide your philosophy as a teacher and scholar?**

My academic, pedagogical, and artistic work is guided by the belief that capitalism cuts the parts of us it considers unnecessary, excessive even, for production and consumption: the parts of us that make life livable. Once I understood that domination is in part sustained through fragmentation of bonds and the elimination of excess, I began prioritizing relationships across fragmentations above the system that fragments us as an urgent, if not lifesaving action. Being the graduate teaching fellow of an Ethnic Studies methods class this past semester, I presented love to my students as the cornerstone of anti-capitalist political work both in and outside of the classroom. Six years of community organizing and teaching in and out of the university have taught that what makes love so potent in the radical classroom space is that it allows for it to become a space for expansion of the self and experimentation of forms of relating that, independently of them being practical outside of it, help us invent new collective identities, dreams, and liberatory impulses.

I have seen how love in the classroom seeks fullness, slowness, as together with my students I learn to prioritize not the individual but the communal. The search for knowledge becomes a process of collectively creating and articulating new registers for understanding and making ourselves understood.

Before the revolutionary “process” there is a revolutionary impulse. I think this impulse emanates from the reification of dignity in the face of utter devastation. But also in the reification of being for the sake of being, of being the thing one might be. I use the word reification here because this is all about materiality—presence, inhabitation, habituation, relation, as I have mentioned before in this interview. I don’t see the classroom as separate from other political work. I am a worker concerned with the “revolutionary” imagination. That is also how I approach the learning communities I partake in, no matter the subject matter.

# REVOLUTIONARY IMAGINATION





**Informed by your teaching experiences, could you summarize in a few sentences what general philosophies guide your approach to the classroom?**

Glissant's Poetics of Relation will forever live in my nightstand. You can see it next to bell hooks' Teaching to Transgress and All about Love. I think care should be the standard of teaching, care for the subject matter, community, etc. Last year Eun-Jin Keish Kim, Camara Brown, and I published an essay entitled "Three Essays toward Care in and beyond Academia" where we discussed the pedagogical legacies of Lorgia García-Peña's work. My part of the article came to me during conversations with Diana Sorensen regarding the role of literary education in the 21st century, where she introduced me to the concept of reparative reading. By meditating on everything García-Peña does in the classroom, I noticed that she brings in a transnational feminist ethics into the learning/teaching esphere. Of García-Peña I wrote that her pedagogy "relies on mother-work that expands and mobilizes nurturance outside the home and brings it into the university space as a radical care practice. This is a reparative practice capable of shaping new ethical futures." This is also what I seek to provide as a teacher.

**What takeaways do you have for teachers in RLL?**

I want to leave this interview with a set of questions: what forms of relating have emerged and been practiced in the classrooms you've loved most? What was your most invigorating learning experience? What made that community so meaningful to you? Meditating and taking seriously where we have found pleasure in learning is such a productive place to access as teachers. After you find whatever it is that has inspired you, steal it, use it, change it, practice it. It is yours for the taking.

**"[A pedagogy] that expands and mobilizes nurturance outside the home and brings it into the university space as a radical care practice"**

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**If you want to learn more about Massiel's perspectives on teaching, make sure to check out**

**["Three Essays toward Care in and beyond Academia"](#)**



## Some relevant resources from the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning

### ★ Registration for Spring Bok Seminars is Now Open

Bok Seminars are academic short courses on a range of topics in teaching, learning, and scholarly communication for PhD students.

Check out the spring lineup:

- Foundations of Teaching in the Humanities and Social Sciences
- Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher
- Grading and Feedback Across Disciplines
  - Designing a Syllabus
- Mentoring: How to Advise (and be Advised)
  - Classroom Communication Skills for International TFs
  - Intercultural Communication Skills for International PhD Students

Learn more and register [here](#)

### ★ Semester Discussion Group for International TAs/TFs and PhD students

An informal group run by undergraduate students to connect and share through practicing English and talking about culture.

The first group session meets next Tuesday, February 8, from 5:00PM to 6:30PM. Meetings repeat every Tuesday until Tue Apr 19 2022 except Tue Mar 15 2022. // Register [here](#).

### ★ Sign up for a Class/Video Observation and Individual Consultation

Teachers at all levels of experience can benefit from a class or video observation. Request one [here](#).

The Bok staff is available to meet with PhD students in individual consultations, including consultations on job market materials. Email [bokcenter@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:bokcenter@fas.harvard.edu) to get started or visit this page for more information.



### ★ Navigating Academic Continuity

As we begin a semester in which a larger number of students (and instructors) may test positive for COVID-19, the Bok Center has prepared advice for the first weeks of classes. Read the document “Advice for Faculty on Navigating Academic Continuity” [here](#).



**HARVARD**

THE DEREK BOK CENTER FOR  
TEACHING AND LEARNING

## Bok Center Fellows Program: Call for Applications

The application for next year’s Pedagogy Fellows in RLL is now open! Since 2017, RLL has had the pleasure of collaborating with Bok pedagogy fellows in the RLL210 and RLL220/230 courses. For those who have participated in these courses, you are aware of the valuable and formative role that pedagogy fellows play in the professionalization and training of the incoming cohort. They serve as both mentors and models of excellence in teaching.

RLL encourages experienced TFs to apply for the position of pedagogy fellows for the 2022-2023 academic year. Please see further details about the position, both in the announcement below from the Bok Center and in the attached job description documents. Applications are due by 5:00 PM EST on Friday, February 25. At the current time, the Bok Center is only accepting applications from experienced TFs (not TAs).

Please feel free to contact Nicole Mills, María Luisa Parra, or some of the former pedagogy fellows for further information about this role (Emily Epperson, Luca Politi, Juan Arias, Xiomara Feliberty-Casiano, Matthew Rodriguez, Nico Moreno, Bahij Tamer). If you are interested in the Media & Design Fellow, please feel free to contact the current fellow, Ignacio Azcueta.

- Pedagogy Fellows enhance training and support for teaching fellows within their departments and across the FAS. They lead pedagogy seminars and workshops, consult with TFs, and develop resources on teaching and professional development for their peers.
- Media & Design Fellows support innovative course development within the FAS, partnering with faculty and staff to design a variety of digital tools, course materials, and assignments for undergraduate courses and departments.

GSAS PhD students are encouraged to seek more information about the positions and to apply on the [Join Our Team page](#) of our website. These positions are ordinarily compensated at a rate equivalent to teaching one section per semester.

**Applications are due by 5:00 PM EST on  
Friday, February 25.**



## RLL "Future Thinking" Discussion Series

The second half of the "Future Thinking" discussion series will be held this Spring! In the Fall, the themes discussed were "The Future of Translation" and "The Future of Interaction."

The two events scheduled are the following:

- + 'The future of Linguistic communities', by Prof. Josh Prada
- + 'The future of textbooks', by Prof. Carl Blyth

Stay tuned for more information!

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## Annual Consortium for Language Teaching and Learning (held at Harvard in April)

The "Consortium for Language Teaching and Learning Symposium" will be hosted by Harvard Language Center on Friday, April 29, 2022.

The Consortium is an association of eight institutions of higher education (Brown University, the University of Chicago, Columbia University, Cornell University, Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Princeton University and Yale University) dedicated to the study and instruction of second languages at the post-secondary level (<http://languageconsortium.org>).

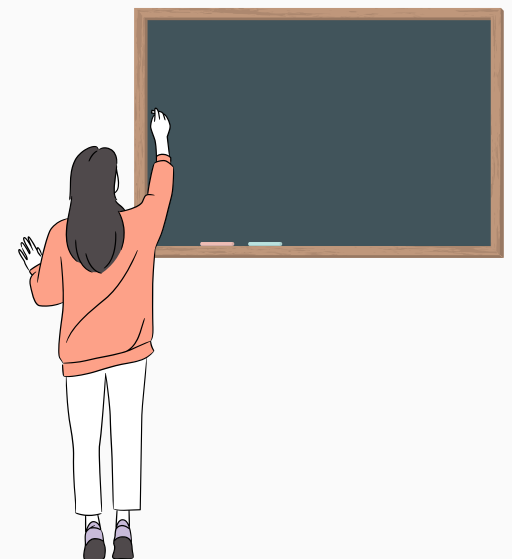
The theme for 2022 is "Future Thinking on Language Teaching and Learning." The past two years have presented extraordinary challenges and new opportunities for the teaching of languages, literatures, and cultures across the world. Educators have adapted methodologies to meet learners' needs, innovated with the help of technology, and are emerging from this latest phase of the pandemic crisis looking toward a future state of the pedagogical environment that will leverage resources, techniques, and other affordances in new ways.



Upcoming  
events  
of interest

### In the Area

The fourth Boston Area Pedagogy Conference, "Envisioning the Future of Learning and Teaching of Languages, Literatures, Cultures and Cinema", will be held virtually on Friday, March 18, 8:30 AM - 5:00 PM. If you are interested in learning more about the conference, more information can be found [here](#)

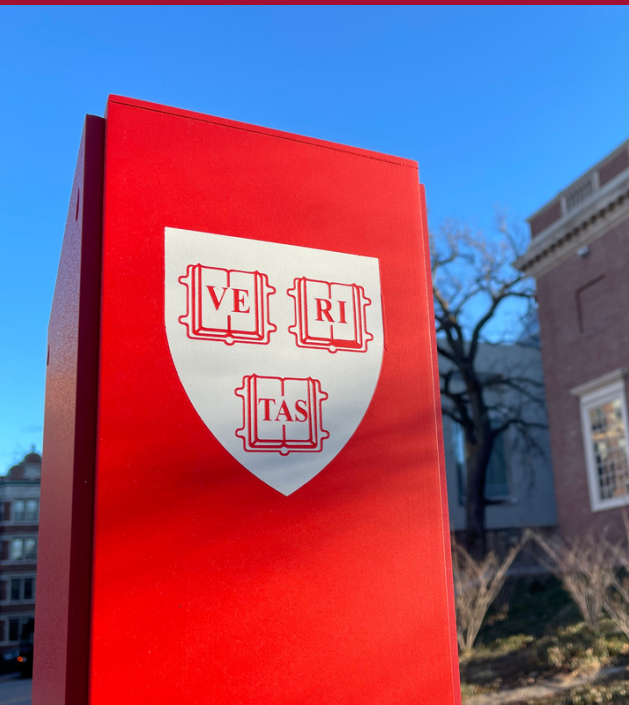




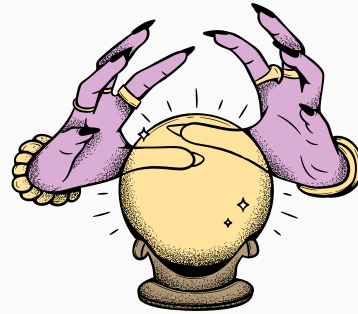
Interested in being featured in  
a future edition of  
“RLL in the Classroom?”  
Wish to nominate a TF/TA?

Please reach out Luca Politi  
([lpoliti@g.harvard.edu](mailto:lpoliti@g.harvard.edu))  
or Juan Arias  
([juanarias@g.harvard.edu](mailto:juanarias@g.harvard.edu)).

# RLL



## Help us decide our monthly social events!



This semester, we will be hosting monthly social events for all RLL's TAs and TFs. This is a great opportunity to catch up with colleagues, share teaching experiences or simply relax from a long week of hard work!

To have a better idea of when would you prefer the events to take place and what kind of setting/activities would you like to participate in, please fill [this poll](#) by February 7.

## We'd love your input...

What's on your mind lately regarding teaching? Do you wish to have a breakout discussion session to float an idea or discuss a recent teaching experience? We'd love to hear about your challenges, successes, or open questions.

No matter how small the comment, we encourage you to [submit this form](#) (anonymous responses are welcome). Your responses will help Juan and Luca to plan events, conversations, or future forum mailings. If it's on your mind, chances are it's on another's as well!