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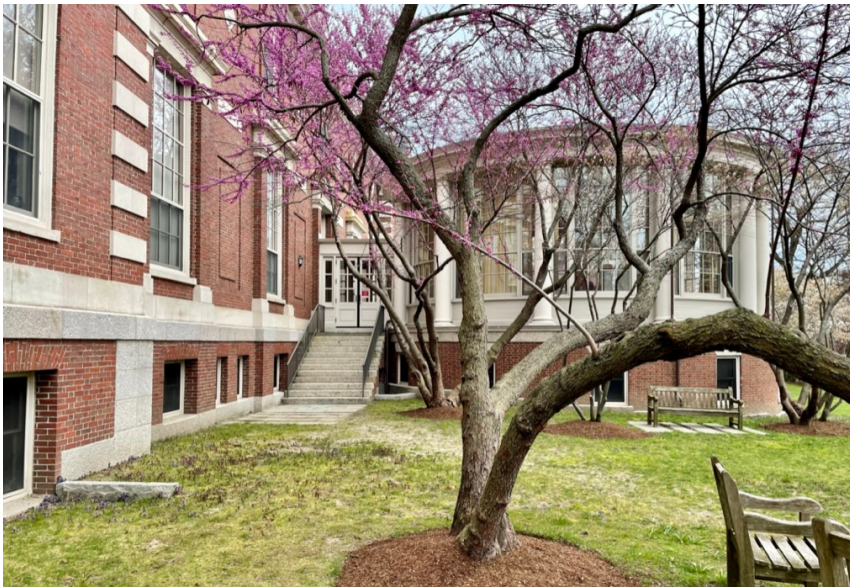
RLL IN THE CLASSROOM

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

Welcome to RLL in the Classroom! This is the May 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



This issue:

Spotlight of the Month:
Prof. Joe Blackmore

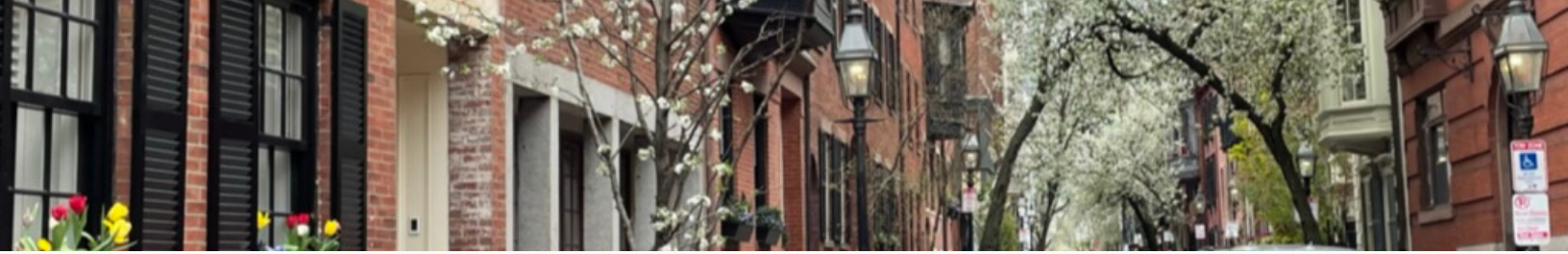
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Spotlight of the month

PROFESSOR JOSIAH BLACKMORE

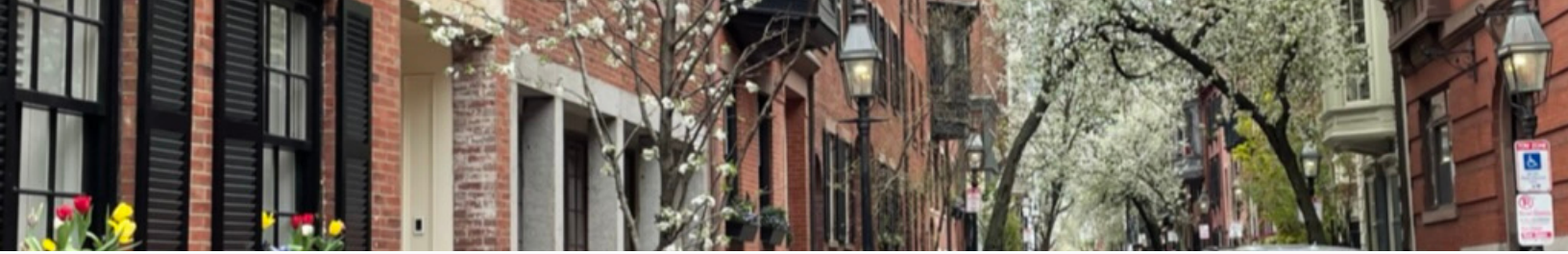
Our previous RLL in the Classroom newsletters featured TA/TFs from each of the four language sections. We spotlighted, in chronological order, Amanda Gann (TF in French), Massiel Torres (TF in Spanish), Giulia Pellizzato (TA in Italian), and Caio Esteves de Souza (TF in Portuguese). We are grateful to our four guests for their generosity and thoughtful contributions! You can find links to all the previous editions on page 12.

In this fifth and final edition of the year, we are proud to feature an interview with Professor Josiah Blackmore, Chair of RLL and Nancy Clark Smith Professor of the Language and Literature of Portugal. Professor Blackmore offers a unique perspective on teaching at Harvard, himself a former graduate student and Teaching Fellow in RLL. From a vantage point characterized by excellence in teaching and scholarship and long-time service to our department, Blackmore reflects on the importance of the critical skills we practice in our courses for today's world, increasingly defined as it is by a vocational focus.



Professor Blackmore portrays his own philosophy as a teacher – how it has developed over the years and how it continues to evolve.

We feel honored to share with you Professor Blackmore's answers to our questions, which we submitted to him via writing after a sit down conversation. As always, we hope that by reading the interview, you can find inspiration for your own experiences "in the classroom."



Thank you for speaking down with us, Professor Blackmore. We are so grateful for the opportunity to learn about your extensive background teaching and working in RLL.

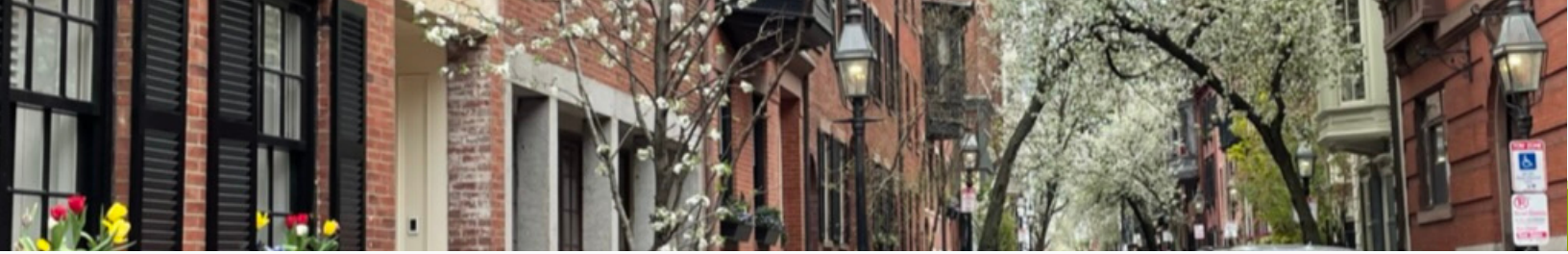
Now Department Chair, you studied in RLL as a graduate student, teaching several language and literature courses. Could you start by outlining for us your teaching experiences, starting from those days as a graduate student and leading to now?

I began teaching beginning Portuguese in RLL my first year as a graduate student. I moved on to teach intermediate Portuguese, beginning and intermediate Spanish, and then I was a TF in the Core Curriculum (dearly departed) for several courses, including Mary Gaylord's "Language, Literature, and Empire" and Dante della Terza's "The Literary Mind of the Middle Ages." Once I graduated and moved to the University of Toronto, I briefly taught Portuguese language for a couple of semesters and then developed a range of Portuguese literature courses that I regularly taught during my 22 years in Toronto.

Back in 1992, which is when I moved to Toronto, none of the existing Portuguese literature and culture courses had women writers on the syllabus! So I changed that, and also added LGBTQ writers and content to several courses. I adapted some of my former Toronto courses as RLL courses, and also created several new ones since my appointment in RLL in 2014.



Dante Della Terza (above) and Mary Gaylord (below), two of Professor Blackmore's first teaching mentors in RLL



Today all first-year TAs and TFs in RLL take ROMLANG 210, “Language Pedagogy: Theories, Approaches, and Practices” (led by Dr. Nicole Mills). The class enables them to recognize and demonstrate the use of teaching approaches grounded in current SLA (second language acquisition) research for teaching communication skills and integrating culture, content, and critical thinking into foreign language pedagogy.

We are interested to hear about your experiences training for teaching, in both practice and theory, as you were beginning to teach in RLL as a graduate student. What methods or techniques did you learn at the time? What resources were available to support your work as a teacher?

I took the forerunner course and practicum of RL 210, which was offered by Wilga Rivers, then a world authority on foreign language pedagogy. Wilga Rivers taught the language pedagogy theory course, and other members of the department offered the practicum which was an excellent chance to learn the pragmatics of teaching and get real-time experience. That experience was decisive in my training as a teacher.

Even though the course/practicum was centered on language, I used the principles and techniques in literature courses also, and continue to do so now. Because, at the end of the day, teaching is teaching. There wasn’t a lot of technology that we used in the classroom in the 80s and 90s – pretty much just videotape and audio recordings, if that. As TFs, we had access to the Danforth Center for Teaching and Learning (the forerunner of the Bok Center) and its several mini-seminars on teaching, evaluating student work, and syllabus design. It was all extremely helpful.

In my RLL training, I learned to engage the students in the classroom as partners in learning, with a highly interactive classroom dynamic. I also provided plenty of opportunities for the students to get to know one another – if the students in a class know one another, it helps the group dynamic enormously. Everyone is more relaxed, more willing to talk, more willing to take chances. There are also several practical things I learned: if the group is small enough, sit everyone in a circle so they can see one another – that encourages conversation because there’s not the sharp divide of the instructor facing rows of students which can stifle participation sometimes. Also, make sure the lights in the room are on – seems simple, but a dark room doesn’t give the message “we’re here and ready to go,” and it also encourages drowsiness. I also try to include and encourage as much humor as possible. Laughter is energizing, perks everyone up, and creates a nice sense of group belonging.



RLL comprises courses in several levels: those focused on language acquisition (at the beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels), “bridge courses” between the studies of language, culture, and literature, advanced courses in literature and culture, as well as graduate level courses.

In addition to courses spanning the ostensible “divide” between language and literature, RLL also integrates different language sections. These divisions serve some practical purposes but they also raise a definitional challenge/opportunity for our identity as a department. How would you sum up our “field” or what we claim to teach in our department? What experiences or activities do we want students in our courses and concentration to have?

I would say that in all of our courses we open up worlds through the languages and critical skills that we teach. As any of us knows, to learn even a few words of another language can shift someone’s perspective dramatically on the world and how people in other linguistic communities experience daily realities.

I think languages help people to become more diplomatic, more accepting of difference, more eager to engage with communities, and yes, even more compassionate. The critical skills that we teach in all of our courses – language, literature, or culture courses – are transferable to other disciplines, contexts, and professional paths. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard RLL alums tell me that RLL taught them how to think. And these are students who have gone on to study medicine, law, business, politics, public service. . . .the list goes on.

I believe that students in RLL courses will become very engaged with a course if they know that they can bring their own experiences to the learning enterprise, that individual and unique aspects of students’ lives are entirely appropriate ways to animate our classrooms and open up maybe unexpected lines of inquiry and exploration. I like to think that RLL students become very invested not just in individual courses but in the educational enterprise because they can eagerly “own” a course because their individual experiences matter. And this dynamic applies to all of our courses in the department.

“I like to think that RLL students become very invested not just in individual courses but in the educational enterprise because they can eagerly ‘own’ a course.”



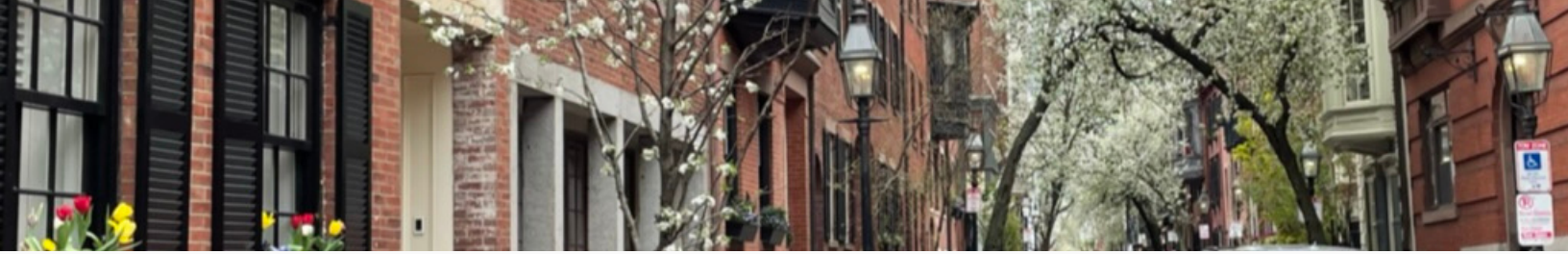
As any observer would remark, RLL is a dynamic place, full of inspiring people working on vibrant ideas. Our community unites around our activities as teachers, students, and researchers. The RLL classroom functions as a point of encounter, a laboratory for the open exchange of voices and approaches. How can we continue to build and sustain a culture around teaching and the classroom in the department while balancing our activities as researchers and students ourselves?

I really like the way you phrased this! The RLL classroom as a “point of encounter” and a “laboratory for the open exchange of voices and approaches” is about the best description of what the ideal classroom should be – and, given how RLL as a whole garners very high reviews from students and concentrators, this clearly is an ideal that is often achieved. I’m extremely grateful for and proud of that fact.

I’ve always intentionally blurred the lines between teaching and research – to me, they’re just different faces of the same activity: learning and thinking. I’ve lost count of how many times my research has benefitted from the courses I teach, from the discussions I have in the classroom. And how many times that, when I’m reading or working on an article or chapter ideas for teaching come to mind – sometimes very unexpectedly and surprisingly!

Seeing teaching and research as related, twin activities – not as separate endeavors – also creates a nice organic unity to our professional pursuits and to our day. But I’m also aware that sometimes we just need to strike a balance between class prep, or grading, and writing and time spent in the library. Personally, I try to be as self-disciplined as I can muster – I decide that, on a given day, I’ll dedicate X amount of time to an activity, and then I stick with that. It’s not always easy or even possible, but over time it really helps to make sure we accomplish our pedagogical and research goals.

ENCOUNTERS



Today, for better or worse, disciplinary differences among the arts and sciences seem more porous than ever. In this context, what is the importance of teaching romance languages and literatures today, at Harvard and for the world?

I think that precisely because of the increased vocational focus in higher education our courses are more important than ever. One of the many benefits of a liberal arts education is the chance to explore interests outside of what a student might imagine as necessary for a successful career. I always encourage students to think of Harvard as an academic playground, and to resist the “shopping list” approach to higher education, e.g., “I need to take this series of courses because it will mean I can get into law school.”

Not only is there no formula for success while at Harvard or after Harvard, thinking too rigidly about what’s the “right” selection of courses detracts from or even forecloses the many exciting opportunities a university offers. At Harvard and around the world, I think courses like ours make students better versions of themselves, better citizens, better people. Again: our courses help open up worlds, and those worlds can be worlds of new possibility, worlds of community and purpose, worlds of skills and techniques. Language and literature courses, here and in universities everywhere, engage with some very basic human qualities, aspirations, and common experiences. It’s obvious but worth noting: “human” is the basis of the humanities, and in a world increasingly marked by violence and suffering, the kinds of things we do in our classrooms, the kinds of thinking we encourage and foster, can go a long way in shaping compassionate, even visionary, ways of interacting with the communities of which we’re a part. We can be positive forces for change. It sounds grandiose, but I truly believe it.

“The kinds of things we do in our classrooms [...] can go a long way in shaping compassionate, even visionary, ways of interacting with the communities of which we’re a part.”





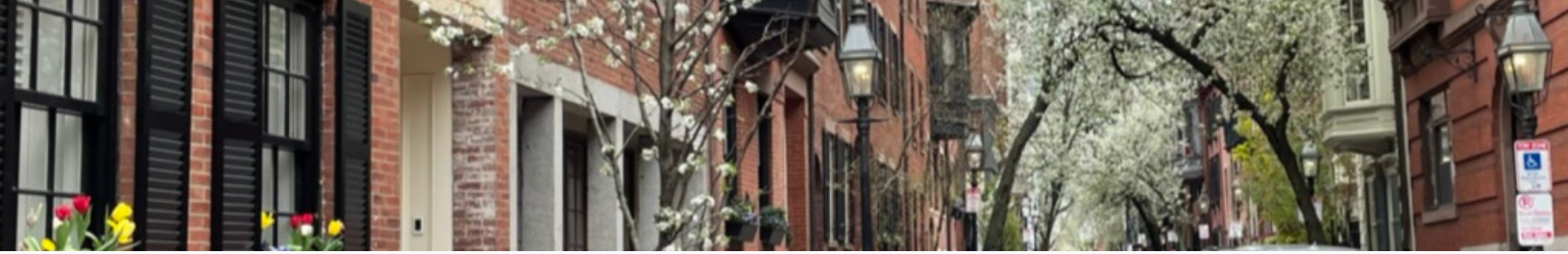
Let's talk more about your individual experiences and interests as an instructor. As an experienced RLL teacher, scholar, and administrator, your personal experience must inform a lot about your teaching today; however, it is probably not the only source for your reflection on pedagogy. How do you continue to learn and grow as a teacher?

I think there are two main ways I've tried to keep my teaching fresh and as forward-looking as possible. The first is becoming more flexible with course content: letting the collective interests of any given class steer us into directions not foreseen on the syllabus. Allowing for happy contingencies, is probably the best way to put it. Closely related to this is becoming more and more willing to take risks, both with the kinds of items I include in a course and with my own thinking and convictions. The second major way is that, more and more, I rely on students' ideas to shape the classroom experience. Students are fountains of ideas, they're really the best resource we have. Put another way: ever since I started teaching I've entered my own classroom as a student, not as an "instructor" in any top-down fashion. That's one of the main joys of my career. My students have taught me more than they can possibly know.

On a related note, how have your own teaching practices evolved over the years?

I think I've become more agile in letting the interests of the group take over, even if it means departing (sometimes significantly) from the syllabus. I often act as a guide through course content, encouraging class participants to bring their own experiences to class – to make it personal, to take a personal stake in the sometimes very geographically and temporally removed materials we study (this from my specialization in medieval and early modern cultures). More and more I encourage students to voice an array of opinions, because that means the classroom can be a true forum for the exchange and coexistence of ideas, for differing viewpoints that can, in those differences, create a climate of respect for everyone.





Could you share any plans or ideas you have for future teaching? How do you want to experiment with content or methodologies in your classes?

I think the main way I envision my pedagogical future is engaging with different methodologies and technologies. I'd like to learn, for example, how to incorporate virtual reality into the classroom, or think of non-traditional and creative ways for students to do course projects, while at the same time maintaining intellectual rigor and discipline. I look forward to learning from RLL colleagues, from the Bok Center, and from anyone who's got some ideas on the matter. I'm creating a new 70-level course in Portuguese for next year, and that seems to be an excellent venue for trying out new things. If anyone has any ideas, I'm all ears!

Thank you for your time, Professor Blackmore, and your tireless service to our department!

Thank you for this opportunity to share ideas. It's been my pleasure!



Professor Blackmore with his students of the seminar "The Worlds of Camões," taught during the fall of 2019



Relevant events and resources from the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning

JOIN THE BOK CENTER FOR TWO WORKSHOPS WITH DAVID GOOBLAR, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH & GENDER, WOMEN'S AND SEXUALITY STUDIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA AND AUTHOR OF THE MISSING COURSE: EVERYTHING THEY NEVER TAUGHT YOU ABOUT COLLEGE TEACHING (HARVARD, 2019).

"Taking Pedagogy Seriously"

Monday, May 9, 3:30pm-5:00pm

When faculty think about our teaching, we too often think about what we're teaching without paying enough attention to how we're teaching. While the content we want our students to learn is certainly important, we do ourselves, our students, and the practice of teaching a disservice when we think of teaching primarily as the dissemination of information. Teaching—the practice of helping others learn—is a discipline every bit as challenging and intellectually satisfying as anything we tackle in our research.

"Teaching Against the Status Quo"

Tuesday, May 10, 10:30am-12:00pm

This interactive session will explore how our unexamined pedagogical practices might be leading to unequal outcomes and look at what the research says about which teaching approaches might help every student succeed. Take a box lunch to go or stay to continue the discussion!



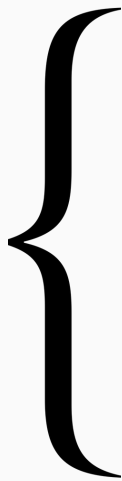
LEARN MORE AND REGISTER [HERE](#)
(MONDAY) AND [HERE](#) (TUESDAY)



Relevant events and resources from the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning

Register for Summer Bok Seminars!

Take some time this summer to reflect on your teaching and learn new skills! Bok Seminars are short courses which allow you to connect and explore areas of interest in teaching, learning, and communication with GSAS PhD students across disciplines. Seminars this summer include:



- Preparing to Teach: A Seminar for New TFs (starts 6/6, in-person)
- How Students Learn (starts 6/6, remote)
- Designing Alternative Assignments (starts 6/6, in-person)
- Mindful Approaches to Race in the Classroom (starts 6/14, in-person)
- Speak Up! Pronunciation for International TFs (starts 6/1, remote)
- Teaching and the Job Market: Getting from TF to Colleague (starts 6/8, remote)

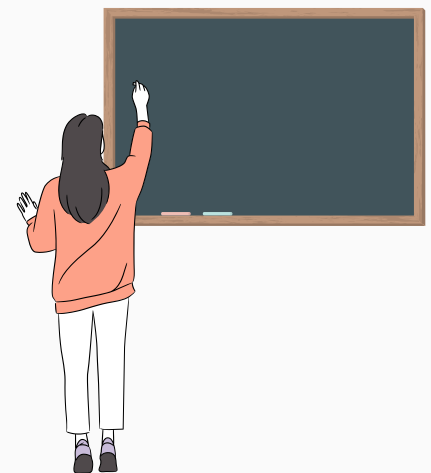
Learn more & register [here](#)

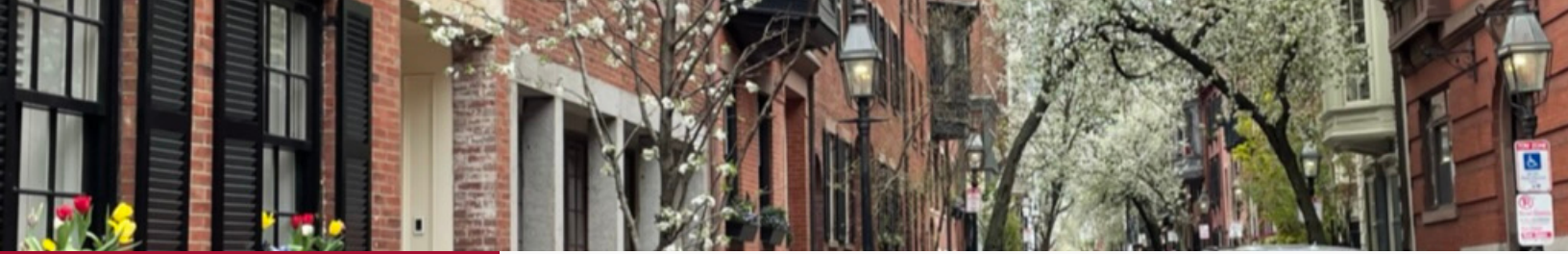
Save the Date for the Fall Teaching Conference!

Join the Bok Center this August for the **Fall Teaching Conference**, designed to prepare new and experienced PhD students for their roles as Teaching Fellows (TFs) in the FAS.

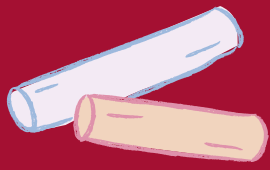
- August 18-19 and August 22-23: Pre-conference Fundamentals sessions for new TFs on Zoom
- August 23-25: In-person sessions on a range of topics in teaching and learning

Explore various topics in teaching and learning, collaborate and share advice with TFs across disciplines, and build enthusiasm for a new year of teaching and learning! Full conference details and registration information will be shared in mid-June.





RLL in the classroom



Thank you for reading!

Access the previous four editions of "RLL in the Classroom" [here](#)



Spotlight of the month AMANDA GANN

Each issue of the "RLL in the Classroom" newsletter will feature a spotlight interview from a current TA or TF in RLL. For the inaugural interview, Juan and Luca had the pleasure to sit down with Amanda Gann, a TF in French for French 40 "French through Cinema" with a particular expertise in artistic practice, including theatre and film.

Some of the topics we touched on include how she incorporates her backgrounds in theatre and performance into her classes, strategies for building connections among the students, evaluating students' progress through creative projects, and more!

Amanda 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."

**How did you arrive at teaching French? What were you doing before?
What other teaching experiences have you had in RLL or at Harvard in general?**

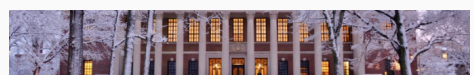
My first French teaching experience was not terribly promising. I was working as a receptionist at an Alliance Française, and one day a teacher quit precipitously. Someone decided that I seemed like a person who could teach, and with almost no training, I was sent to wrangle a bunch of three- to five-year-old children in an immersion class. We ended up singing a song about frogs nearly 20 times in a row because it was the only thing I could get them to do. The experience did pique my interest in language pedagogy, however. During my time at RLL, I have had the opportunity to learn from some passionate and innovative language teachers – Stacey Katz Bourns, Nicole Mills, and Ericka Knudsen, to name only a few.

"For many students, it seemed that French allowed them to process discoveries they were making, about themselves and the world around them, in that time of upheaval"



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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 @QSAS 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?

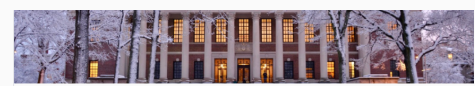
You ask this, and I already see myself facing a group of eager yet shy students on their first day of class. As a matter of fact, I am a bit reserved about introducing myself in that first session with my students. My goal is to facilitate connections across them to model prioritizing community over 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"



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Spotlight of the month GIULIA PELLIZZATO

For this month's spotlight, we had the pleasure to sit down with Giulia Pellizzato, Teaching Assistant in Italian.

Having taught for many years in different settings, Giulia reflects on how teaching the Italian language and culture this year continues to enrich her identity as a scholar and an educator. Inspired by the Value-Creation philosophy of the Japanese educator Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, Giulia shares her practice of helping students to "make meaning" in the classroom. Leading a one-on-one class this semester with a student with special needs prompts Giulia to reflect critically on enhancing the experiences of all students.

As you will find from her responses to our questions, Giulia is a reflective and generous interlocutor. We are grateful for the chance to learn more about her journey and the ways she has impacted those of her students, and to now share her reflections with you.

Giulia wrote down her responses to our questions. We hope that by reading the interview, you can find inspiration for your own experiences "in the classroom."



"I see my future as inextricably linked to fostering learning as a form of empowerment and emancipation through language and literature"

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Spotlight of the month CAIO ESTEVES DE SOUZA

For this month's spotlight, we interviewed Caio Esteves De Souza, a third year graduate student and Teaching Fellow in the Portuguese section. Caio reflects on teaching beginning and upper-level Portuguese this year, including the benefits of working with popular culture to help engage students and spark debate. Having previously taught at the university level in Brazil, Caio discusses what he thinks the two traditions can learn from each other, and how his experiences teaching at Harvard have shaped his teaching philosophy in new ways.



Caio wrote down his responses to our questions. We hope that by reading the interview, you can find inspiration for your own experiences "in the classroom."

"It's not a matter of emancipating our students, but merely of acknowledging an emancipation that is already there, and letting them enact it in the classroom"

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Feliz verano! / Buona estate!
Juan & Luca