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**Say “Yes, and…” to the Remix:**

**A Practical Philosophical Approach to Meaning Making, Discovery, and Learning in Higher Education**

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*Why is the sky blue? Why the birds fly? We are born free,*

*Mother Nature blessed each of us with a pair of wings.*

*I never liked caged bird singing. Their beautiful, however dismal tune makes me feel blue all the time.*

*Maybe, they are not singing at all. That’s only what us greedy people think of them.*

- A remix of the sentence, “I know why the caged bird sings” written by four international students on the first day of a college academic writing class.

**Walking Into the Classroom Backwards**

Ten years ago, after teaching speaking and conversation classes to international students from eight different countries (13 languages) at ASA College in New York City, I (Gwen)[[1]](#footnote-1) walked into my first academic writing course. What you see above is a product of the first few minutes of the class where I said “hello,” wrote on the board “I know why the caged bird sings,” and then said, “What is this? Write.” I looked at them, made eye contact with each student, and said again “Write.” After they wrote, I asked them to pair up and share what they wrote with each other. I then led us in writing a collective poem. The stanza above was one part of that creation. We reflected on the process, what we had been able to create with just one sentence.Or was it *just* one sentence?

Thus began a journey of exploring what happened here. As I shared this experience with colleagues, I said, “I walked into the classroom backwards.” We did not do the appropriate first-day-of-class activities (e.g., introducing ourselves or reviewing the syllabus). We just simply began collectively creating with an offering via writing.Since then, I’ve been discovering the power of remix for creating developmental learning environments, including meeting Kirby Ferguson through his TED Talk, *Embrace the Remix* (2012, 8:46):

Our creativity comes from without, not from within. We are not self-made. We are dependent on one another, and admitting this to ourselves isn't an embrace of mediocrity and derivativeness — it's a liberation from our misconceptions. And it's an incentive to not expect so much from ourselves, and to *simply begin* [emphasis added].

So, as I see it, I walked in backwards and we “simply began.” I share this story with you to tell you a bit about myself and remind us of our human capacity to create with whatever we have access to. I developed this activity on the spot. I had never taught academic writing before. Since I am a seasoned improviser and trained social therapist[[2]](#footnote-2), having designed and coordinated playful, improvisational trainings, programs, and presentations for educators and students, conversation was my bailiwick!

Yet there I was, stuck in the hallway outside of my academic writing class, trying to look nonchalant as the students entered the classroom. Years of schooling and standardized test taking have taught students to write for a grade. They have become alienated from themselves as writers, where products of their own creation become objects for transaction starting at 6 years old, if not before. I wanted their experiences in our academic writing class to change our practices of how and for whom we write. I hoped we could create a writing ensemble improvisationally and an environment where we relate to each other as creators of our classroom's culture andwhere we can exercise that creativity continually. This kind of environment can help people to deal effectively with the humiliation of trying new things and risking failure, which are keys to learning and developing (Morales-Almazan, this volume; Perone, Scene 11, this volume). Students and teachers can collectively build a classroom community where we continuously engage societal assumptions and identities and, in doing so, create something new.

So, I stood frozen in that hallway on that first day of class, wondering how to *not* turn these students off to writing any more than they likely already had been. What thawed me? We began creating together on the spot. We began with one sentence and our collective lives. We were unleashed. We could see what, how, and most importantly, *that* we could create together. Now the challenge was how to relate *continuously* to each other as co-creators of our learning environment.

**Offers to Remix**

We have been in the remix “business” for a while. Under the auspices of the East Side Institute, we offered regular “Everything is a Remix” workshops in a recording studio from 2012 to 2017. They started with a collective poem, similar to the “I know why the caged bird sings” exercise, and grew into all kinds of songs. In this scene, we hope to offer you a “remixing” lens through which to see a kaleidoscope of relations and creations, intricate webs of unpredictable collisions across time and space. We are also eager to share with you the joy of adding a remix sensibility to your repertoire, no matter your content area or the level of the writing class.Our interest is in cultivating a remix sensibility to develop a seamless relationship in the classroom between creativity, the learning process, and the production of new works; i.e., relating to the course of study as opportunities to create/make something new out of what exists and become more engaged pedagogues.  
 Tapping into our students and colleagues’ capacity to perform – to do what we don’t know how to do -- is the through line for all of this activity and what we find keeps students engaged as co-creators of the learning environment (Holzman, 2017). Since environments that support our capacity to be who we are and we are becoming throughout the lifespan are social/joint activities (Holzman, 2004), our passion for remixing is tied to itsreliance on and creation of joint activities. This scene shows how educators can continuously grow their classroom learning environments by remixing or creating with each other’s offers. That, as you know, is counterintuitive to our training as teachers and students (see section “Educators Don’t Like Copying…” in this scene) - thus, *creating* a remix ensemble is a performance; something we don’t know how to do, something beyond ourselves! As Holzman says, “If learning and development occur by creating environments for joint activity, in which you can perform past where you are at the moment, then it would make sense that what you would want to do to continue learning and growing is to create joint activity (Holzman 2004, p. 5).

This scene offers activities to support your *continuously* creating joint activities   
through collectively *remixing*.

These activities help you and your students expand what you have access to, from 5,000 years of written history, to emerging digital tools, to popular culture, and to philosophical concepts, in order to enliven course content, create new products of learning, and simultaneously build the improvisational ensemble - a positive challenge to the individualized and competitive culture of higher education.

Remix is generally used in relation to music (Remixology Blog, 2021). However, the remix process is employed in virtually every creative activity. Since many academic courses require writing, we will focus on activities to bring out students’ creative impulses for it. Though the difference between academic and creative writing dominates many discussions of the two, we will work to blur the boundary by redefining creativity as the making of anything. The activities offer:

● Philosophical inquiry challenging alienated ways of seeing human creativity - usually in the form of a quote you and your students can remix using various methods;

● A chance to *retrace* the remix (e.g., where *do* good ideas come from?);

● Community/ensemble/learning environment building and;

● A chance to make something together no matter your content area, forms of writing, and methods of research.

We survey remix activities that build community. We delight in remix as a cultural tool

with a significant influence in Hip Hop, whose history is intrinsically connected to remix (Hall, 2011). Strewn throughout are the voices of artists, philosophers, economists, social psychologists, and more. Our remix activities are multi-faceted practices, from ones that can last a whole term to those you can play with when you want.

All of these are tools to help you to

appreciate that everything is a remix and to bring intentionality to it.

**What Remix Is, Its Philosophical Challenge, and Why That’s so Cool**

Remixing is the process of making something new out of what exists; drawing not only from physical materials (e.g., ink, paint, bricks, and fabric) but from creative works as well (essays, songs, and jokes). Remixing is an aspect of an improvisational life activity that gives us access to ourselves (our species) as makers - of conversations, technological innovations, and the environments in which we learn.

Remix can be hard to define because it is something that humans do all the time. It is also something that we can consciously develop.

This scene offers remixing activities that support students to make use of everything: to grapple with course content, embrace the unexpected, bring their histories and cultures, create new products of learning, and simultaneously build community in the classroom and with the broader world. Whether it is a poetic characterization of life, an iteration of bluegrass music, yet another film based on *Romeo and Juliet*, digitally sampling a tune and creating around it, or dance moves made of ballet, Swing, and Up Rock, humans have been remixing beats, melodies, fashion, social movements, languages, philosophies, food, and more at least since history has been recorded. Remix is the foundation for all of what we have read, sung, built, played, and performed for centuries. One could make the claim that remix culture has been around as long as culture itself.  
 The materials we use to create are all around us, as were the materials used by our ancestors and their ancestors. What we can access can expand our imagination. The more we can access, the more we can imagine (DeKoven, 2016). With today’s technology, the possibilities for connecting with cultures and creative innovations are endless and expand what we can remix, what we can create, and with whom. Lessig (2008) wrote that the emerging technologies of remix culture were a significant positive development for society because they democratized tools for communication and creativity. Everyone, no matter their age, could create, publish content, and have an audience. In fact, Lessig’s 2008 book, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* was (and still is) available for free download (and remixing!) in what is known as The Creative Commons and can be accessed at<https://creativecommons.org>. Remix has continued to flourish in many areas of life since then, with Lessig as one of its strongest proponents. It is for that reason, we are very happy that the last section of this scene offers you a portal to his very practical new way of seeing writing as part of a “Read/Write Culture,” a great advance, we believe, over the dominant “Read Only” culture.

Prior to Lessig’s advancement of remix, Hip Hop made it a part of music and culture more broadly internationally. It is arguably the world's most popular music genre (Remixology Blog, 2021). Hip Hop has put remixing and remix culture on the map more than any other phenomenon (Remixology Blog, 2021). East Side Institute Media and Tech Producer Desire Wandan is a Hip Hop artist, producer, teaching artist, videographer, documentarian, and content creator. He is creating a series of video interviews of Hip Hop elders, chronicling the rich history of this movement. He had this to say about how Hip Hop came into being:

The conditions that created the culture of Hip Hop was a lot of alienation. People felt alienated. They felt they couldn't be a part of that midtown (Manhattan) nightlife. It started with the people in the parks with the fire hydrant, and one guy bringing out his turntable, and another guy bringing out his turntable and a mixing board and the fan on it, and connecting it to the light post for electricity. It was people getting together and doing what they could to create this shared experience (personal communication, April 4, 2023).

Young people on the streets began creating art, creating *with* art, remixing elements of the city, music genres, lyrics, graffiti, fashion and dance: performing as musicians, dancers, fashion designers way before the official credential was bestowed upon them. What a vibrant and generative learning environment.

You can see why educators were interested in *bringing* that entrepreneurial spirit and passion   
for collective learning *into* their classrooms.

**Hip Hop Pedagogy**

Like many other cultural activities present in the lives of young people, Hip Hop is an ideal Zone of Proximal Development (Holzman, 2010). Many educators have been studying this phenomenon and bringing Hip Hop into K - 12 through graduate-level classrooms for decades. Thus, the field of Hip Hop Pedagogy was born (Hall, 2011). While a thorough description of Hip Hop Pedagogy is beyond the scope of this scene, one of our co-authors, (D. Baylor), is a Hip Hop artist, academic, producer, illustrator, and Hip Hop researcher. D. offers pedagogical advice to those who are infusing this remix culture into their classrooms. He advises us to reframe our notion of the space in and for Hip Hop. More specifically, he doesn't think it's about what Hip Hop brings to the space outside of students in the space, but rather that this *is* the space, Hip Hop already exists there, and the students already have it. Hip Hop has tapped into cultural underground sources – of not only angst, but also joy – in a way that the articulation of it is understood. We can welcome Hip Hop and give it space to expand and support an underground well of people who have wanted to do this thing. This reframe expands our notion of remixing in the classroom by questioning the notion of *bringing* Hip Hop *into* the pedagogical space, when in fact the advance is to challenge how Hip Hop and many other cultural phenomena are kept out. With that said, we continue in *our* vein: developing an appreciation that all the materials needed for our remix ensemble are already in the classroom (as they were in the vignette at the opening of this scene).

All we need to do, as Kirby Ferguson said earlier, is “simply begin.”

**Everything Is a Remix**

The fact that you can continuously create with myriad elements of your life, you never need to be concerned about being creative. This can be both a wonder and a relief. As Ferguson (2012) suggests, we can always copy, transform, and combine the elements and creative products around us. We all create from the same raw materials and tools that were made from them. Everything is a remix. Ferguson (2012) does a deep dive into the historical development of artistic, technological, and scientific innovations to illustrate his points.

So, off Ferguson’s deep dive, why don’t we take a little kiddy pool dive? Wherever you are as you read this scene (so glad you’re reading this scene!), look around you - in every direction. Look above and below you. Look at you. Where did all of this stuff come from? Throughout history, we humans have been creating something new out of what exists. If we didn’t, we wouldn’t be here now. The classroom can open a doorway to relating to subject matter not only as material to be learned or knowledge to be consumed, but also as additional elements with which students can create and perform their lives (Weinstein et al., 2003).

Let’s get a glimpse at how everything is a remix. We will start with a basic and evergreen remixing activity.

**A Basic and Evergreen Activity: Remix a Sentence**

This activity has a strong family resemblance to the scene’s opening vignette. It holds a few essential ingredients for remixing: an offering to the group (e.g., something you’d like them to explore), directions for a step-by-step remix that supports the emergence of the writing ensemble, and options for sculpting and reciting a new product. The new product could end up looking like a poem but does not have to follow any recognizable pattern. These ingredients work well in-person and online. We remind readers that this and all remixing activities are improvisations, so we suggest encouraging students to listen, look, be inspired by, and build with everything that is being given. It is a “Yes, and…” activity (Halpern et al., 1994, Perone & Santucci, this volume; Toler & Ali, this volume). Write all student responses on a virtual or in-person public document or board. You will find that Google Docs, Google Jamboard, and other shareable online platforms work very well if you are online and/or in person.

**An Offering to the Group**

Choose a sentence or phrase. It could be a lyric from a poem or a song or a line from a book, an academic article, a movie, or a TED Talk. Offer something you think might inspire, remind, spark imagination, raise questions, and/or more. The sentence from the opening vignette, “I know why the caged bird sings” is one possibility. ”Matter cannot be created or destroyed,” for example, is another.

**Step-by-Step Directions for Instructor**

● Ask everyone to give you a word that is a response to, or is inspired by, the sentence or phrase. Just one word. Whatever comes to mind. Just shout it out or write it on the collective Google document or Jamboard. *Anyone* can give one word. If someone chooses to repeat a word that was already given, terrific; repeating a word is a strong offering as well.

● Now, let’s create a few phrases with those words. Ask students to give a phrase/two words or more together off of the words that were just written. Again, students can repeat words that were generated by other students. Ask everyone to give you a phrase. It’s ok if not everyone offers one.

● As the activity transpires, encourage students to listen to each other and watch as the writing unfolds.

**Sculpting and Reciting a New Product**

Now that we have a bunch of phrases, let's create something that is *ours* off of this – something that can stand on its own. You can take suggestions for this creation from the whole class or break students into small groups to do it. Either way, reconvene as a whole group and put all the phrases together.

* The group sculpts this new offering. This process can include adding other words or phrases or taking some out. Keep sculpting and making something you’d like to see as a group. Then stop.
  + We recommend using an Erasure/blackout poetry technique. This is when you take words away, rather than add them. The blackout poem in Figure 1 is an example. As well, we offer a video from Steven Licardi, our favorite blackout poem teacher: "Coup de Mot: Poetry of Everywhere" <https://vimeo.com/689733816> (IA Day Switzerland, 2022).
* Next, read this newly created piece aloud. There are many options for doing this: individually, as small groups, or chorally. You might give the piece a beat, create a melody, record it, and/or add some visuals. Small groups can put their own twist on it and perform for each other.

Any way you choose is great.

**Figure 1**

*Sample Blackout Poem*

**Reflection Is Key**

With all collectively created activities, we suggest a simple reflection that can often be sparked by the question: “How was that?” Be curious. With this activity, you can see the power of creating the remix ensemble**.**

It is ours; we create it. We can continually recreate it.

**Extension: Creating With Our Class’s Remixed Product**

The method used in this extension activity is relevant for all subject matter and is often used in the areas of mathematics, physical science, and the arts. Here is a sample based on the collective remix of the line, “I know why the caged bird sings.”

* Direct students to find the two prominent authors associated with this line. One is easy to find and one is not. Find both.
* Students work in small groups, using whatever devices they have to get online.
* Each group shares what they’ve learned. Our world continues to open up.
* In various experiences with this activity, students easily find the title of Maya Angelou’s first autobiographical work (Angelou, 2009). However, it usually takes a while and collective effort to find the other and *original* author. It is Paul Laurence Dunbar. The line “I know why the caged bird sings” comes from his poem, “Sympathy” (Dunbar, n.d.).
* Students research Dunbar and Angelou’s lives and consider why/how they both write that *they know* why the caged bird sings. What were their life experiences? Building with these activities, much is raised and further researched about how Dunbar was born a few years after slavery legally ended in the United States and that his parents spent most of their lives as slaves. This research has led to further reflection on the meaning of “I know why the caged bird sings.”
* Try emphasizing various parts. Say them out loud. For example, place emphasis on a particular word and vary which word is emphasized. Start with **I** know why the caged bird sings. Then try, I **know** why the caged bird sings. Continue emphasizing other words in a similar fashion. Place emphasis on different phrases, too. What do you see?

Our research then continues as does our appreciation that and how Angelou remixed Dunbar’s poem.

* I then offer Dunbar’s short story, *The Ingrate*(Dunbar, 2002), an account of what slaves encountered when they interacted with their masters as well as the power of reading and writing. I then ask students various questions about it, including: Why do you think it was *illegal* for slaves to read and write and for anyone to *teach* slaves to read or write? We put their answers on a Google Doc and remix them. This activity often generates philosophical and political conversations that flow between the history they were discovering and the history of their elders.

Our relationship to the title of Angelou’s memoir, and so her childhood, and Dunbar’s poem and short story, and so his life and those of his community, was intimately developed through our collective creativity. We incorporated their work in a way that made it compelling and created something new. One of those new processes/products was our developing classroom ensemble.

We copy. Transform. Create. Combine. Sample, Steal

Act Like, Echo, Emulate, Mimic, Mirror

Simulate, Borrow, Reflect, Complete,

Follow Suit, Pretend.

**Educators Don’t Like Copying but We All Do It and Open Source Is Here to Stay**

As an educator and teacher trainer for the past 30 years (and a person schooled in traditional institutions for 18 years), I have had it drummed into me that not only should I not copy, but I also should not let anyone copy from me. However, as Ferguson (2012) points out,

copying is the way we learn. We offer the following explication of the role of copying from an accomplished jazz pianist, international ensemble builder, and higher education instructor whom we interviewed for this scene:

Part of the development for many improvisers is to copy, in written form, another musician’s solo-improvised piece, listen to it, and play it repeatedly. It is very good ear training, a very good musicianship exercise. Connie Cruthers (American jazz improviser and pianist), my music teacher, made all of her students sing along to records with a singer or an instrumentalist - to get the nuances, the dynamics that you don’t usually do with your voice. Copying is essential to this developmental process (U. Schlicht, personal communication, May 12, 2022).

Copying is, as well, essential to the developmental process of remix in *writing*. Rather than discouraging copying, we should support our students to get the “nuances” and “dynamics” of the written material by repeating it as part of the remix. Embracing everything we have available, including copying and repetition, bolsters the educational process and opens the door for developmental learning, learning where all the participants grow.

**Bring** **Joy and Acuity to Academic Writing: Say “Yes, and…” to the Remix**

Let’s lead our students with this positive credo:

“Be curious about the world in which you live. Look things up. Chase down every reference. Go deeper than anybody else--that's how you'll get ahead.” (Kleon, 2012, p. 19).

My experience of classrooms that remix, share, appreciate, and embrace the offers among and around us, is that they are abuzz, all term long, with the excitement of what we all have to offer each other. Our class Google Doc Folder holds all of our writing. It is there for anyone to peruse. We invite you to join us! We have many world citizens with whom to collaborate since we (faculty and students) are part of a growing, flowing, emerging global community where we can break down the walls of academic writing and make it more relevant. One name for this movement is Read/Write Culture. We thought it fitting to end this scene by getting acquainted with this movement and what it has to offer.

**Read/Write Culture**

The term “Read/Write Culture” is most associated with Lessig who argues that with the advent of the digital age, we have shifted from a Read Only (RO) culture to a Read/Write (RW) culture (2008). Lessig explains that the traditional RO culture is one in which there exists particularly sanctioned material and authors to be read. In higher education, we can see that the producers of these written products become authorities (and are thus defined as “professionals”). Their material generally is not designed to inspire questions or response. RO culture is a consumer culture.   
 RW culture, by contrast, emerges as one in which we are all both consumers and producers. In RW culture, all are expected to write in response to what they read. So, the “amateurs” are also related to as producers. Material in RW culture “asks more of the audience...it is offered as a draft...it invites a response” (Lessig, 2008, p.84). RW culture continues to grow as does its burgeoning influence in education. As the number of “producers” in RW culture continues to increase, Lessig maintains that RW culture does not detract from the literary tradition intrinsic in RO culture. To the contrary, Lessig writes, “You pay respect to tradition by incorporating it. But you make the tradition compelling by doing so in a way that makes everyone want to understand it more” (2008, p. 95). Producers in RW culture refocus attention onto the materials of RO culture. As Len Unsworth says in his 2008 article “Comparing and Composing Digital Re-presentations of Literature,”it is common today for there to be no dichotomy between avid readership of novels and extensive online activities for young people.

**Conclusion**

Let’s go forth and remix. Embrace this emerging stimulus to our collective creativity. Learning is creative and collective. The need for making new discoveries for human and more-than-human life is upon us. What is the role higher education will play? Instructors can celebrate that coming together with myriad groups of students creates fertile ground for remixing with everything available to us.

Everything is a remix and we can remix everything we can access.

Our canvas and elements to create with are endless.

**Epilogue**

It is now the morning of May 8, 2023, the last day of the semester in my introductory English composition course at Pace University. I am feeling uneasy about giving my students the usual course-ending writing assignment, which they do on their own. For the previous sixty days, at least half of the students in the class had not been coming to school. I had been getting emails from individual students apologizing for not attending, citing their individual problems with living. They couldn’t get out of bed. They were depressed or anxious. Some shared “official” psychological and learning disability diagnoses.  
 Where was our class ensemble? Where was the community we had been building all semester? It seemed to me that it was likely that the students didn’t realize that others were sharing very similar experiences. Instead, they felt they were alone, even though there were thousands of undergraduates at Pace who had also stopped coming in. About a month before, I invited everyone to get on Zoom with me. I talked about how challenging the world was, how I didn’t know how to help, but I did think that we could create something together that could be supportive of us all. One by one, students talked about gun violence, poverty, fear of climate change, unfettered ChatGPT, their diagnoses, raging wars, their losing interest in school, and all the shame that goes with that. We listened and created with each other as we had in the remix activities during the semester.  
  
 It was clear to me that ending the class with an individual writing assignment was NOT the way to go.

I remembered that this class performed a collective activity on the first days of class, the same exercise I used in the first writing class I ever taught: remixing the sentence, “I know why the caged bird sings.” We had saved what we wrote in a Google Doc. I walked into the class, opened the Google Doc, and said that our final task was to create with what WE had written. I led them through steps for doing that. The room was aglow with appreciation of each other and our creative process as we cooperated in building a new caged bird poem. Going forward as a teacher, I will offer opportunities to remix student writing throughout the term.  
 My new motto is:

Don’t stop remixin’  
  
*“The beauty of being free is what makes the isolated woman cry”*Collectively written on May 8, 2023

\*\*the end\*\*

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1. Lowenheim is the teacher of record. When the text is in the first person singular, it is her voice. When the text is in the first person plural, it is Lowenheim and Belmont speaking/writing. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a description of social therapy, see <https://eastsideinstitute.org/about/social-therapeutics/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)