III. Making It Personal

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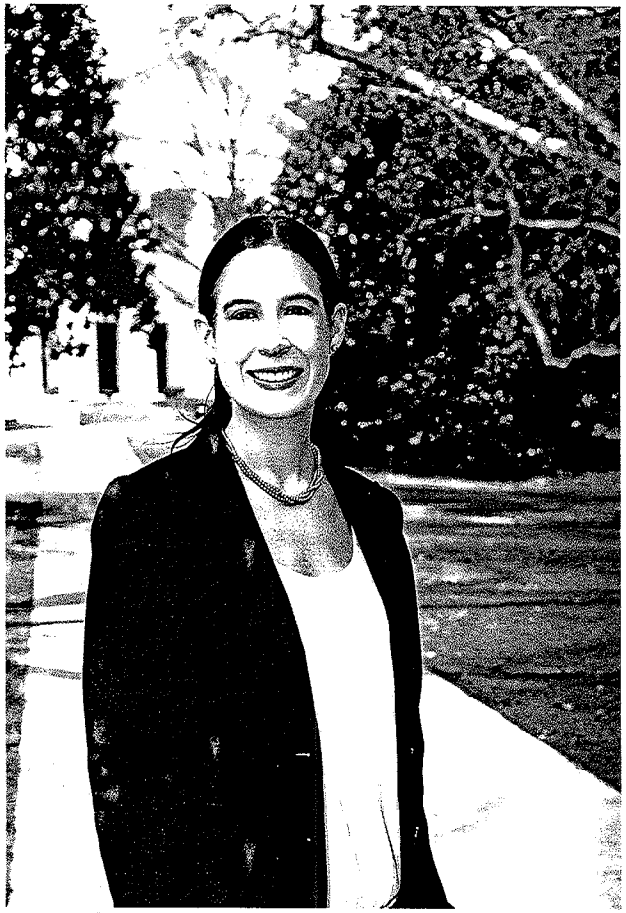
Teaching Through Circles

In a 2010 TED talk, Elif Shafak, speaks to the power of circles. "If you want to destroy something in this life..." she maintains, "all you need to do is to surround it with thick walls. It will dry up inside." Shafak argues that communities of the like-minded plague our world. Social and cultural circles are invisible, yet strong, and powerful, and they lead us to draw stereotypes of the "other" and to judge the other in perilous ways. Such circles follow us, shape our experiences, and filter our perceptions. Her solution is storytelling. She proposes that fiction gives us a way to punch holes through circles, to get a glimpse of the "other," to leave one's cozy home and experience something that is different, then to thrive.



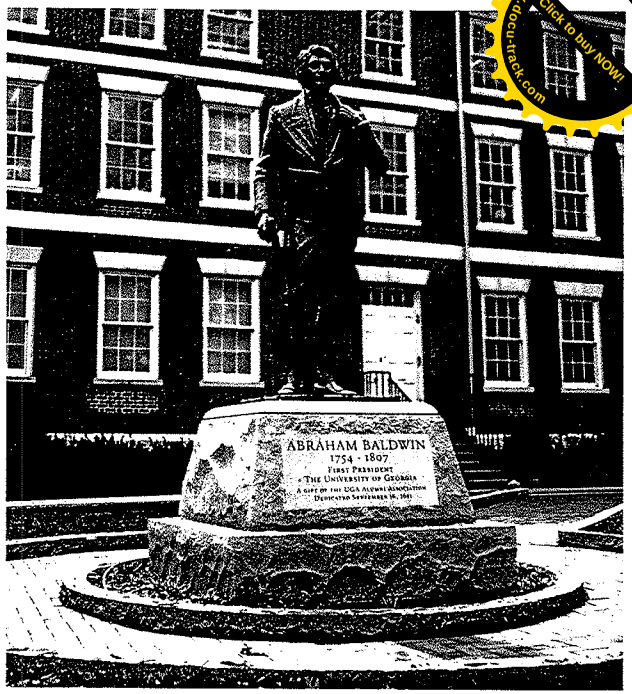
She is on to a critical point: How can I as a teacher widen imaginations? How can I support students to recognize and understand different ideologies or transcend impossibly strong social forces in order to welcome and incorporate new knowledge into their identity? My solution, and my classroom tip for this edition of *Chalk Talk*, is to teach with circles in mind. Below I describe three ways that I do this, with an emphasis on incorporating research into the classroom experience. I hope these philosophies and strategies are helpful in your classroom as well.

First, I strive to *recognize and respect* the circles that follow students into the classroom. I anticipate them, and I listen for their sound. Yes, circles make sounds, and you can hear them when students share their diverse experiences with you verbally before, during, and after class. Some students will write you about their experiences via mail, and, sometimes, you might not actually hear the story but only see something intangible in their expression – suggesting that a situation unrelated to class is affecting them. Some sagas will be joyful; some will require you to extend a Kleenex to wipe away tears. I don't view listening to personal experiences as irrelevant or as an annoyance or as something otherwise undesirable. This is how I come to understand the social contexts that follow students to my class. To me, this is the sound of their circles, and this is where I start.

Second, I *bring circles to their attention* by requiring them to reflect, articulate, and share opinions in class. I take time to help them ponder what past experiences, learned values, and motivations have shaped their opinions. I remind them that whatever they believe, someone sitting very close to them believes something different. In one exercise I ask them – if their parents had a motto, what would it be? The range of their responses is striking. Students blink in astonishment to learn that what was so deeply embedded in their household was not emphasized or even taught in the home of their classmates. A rapid chatter typically follows. To me, this is the sound of students discovering the existence of their own circles.

Third, I *make circles malleable* by employing a class research project. We create an experimental vignette to test a hypothesis of students' collective choosing. This involves students working together to hash out a research question, a vignette to be manipulated, and appropriate survey questions that capture key variables. Students get frustrated with each other as they work out potential casual diagrams. They disagree in their small groups, they argue when the full class reassembles, and they complain to me privately about some people working harder than others. They don't always get along and strong debates lasting multiple class periods ensue. To me, this is the sound of circles bumping against each other and being permeated.

But permeating circles only gets me halfway there; I want students to incorporate ideas from others into their world and allow their social context to expand. What follows them to their next course or life experience should be broader, richer, and more vibrant, not just a punctured version of their old self. This is why a research exercise is so fitting. By the end of every semester, despite the release of some hot air, a good and strong project is produced, data is collected, students discover the answer to a unique research question, and they come to create new knowledge together. There is often a silence in the class when I share final tabulations.



Natasha Ganem is a Lecturer in the Department of Sociology and began teaching at the University in 2011. Natasha received her PhD in sociology from Emory University in 2006. Her specialty areas include research methods, juvenile delinquency, and social psychology.

Most semesters I even have to look up from the podium, somewhat panicked and curious as to whether students are awake, paying attention, or if I have lost them; however, I am consistently relieved when I do because students are always looking at the screen in the front of the room. They furrow their brows and stare intently at the findings. No one is texting under their desk and no one has their head down. To me, the enveloping silence is the sound of circles growing.

Last week I watched my 3-year-old son kick a ball across North Campus. He played, pondered acorns, threw pennies into the fountain, and happened upon the statue of Abraham Baldwin. Excitedly he ran the circular path around this statue. He giggled as he completed his path. He stopped briefly, smiled at me, and kept running, again in another circle, and again and again. Unaware of the significance embodied in the bronzed statue standing directly in the center of his universe of folly, it made for the perfect metaphor. Perhaps he too will attend UGA and have professors that allow him to grow tall from the circle that follows him. Just as Abraham Baldwin positioned above him, he too should take the important step forward to teach, to serve, and to inquire into the nature of things, well beyond the circle he currently navigates.

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