Learning by Blundering: Margaret Fuller and the Pedagogy of Conversation

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Following the return to in-person instruction after the virtual years of the COVID-19 pandemic, I have increasingly relied on small group discussions in the classroom. (My undergraduate English classes are capped at 30 students each—too large for seminar-style discussions that might include everyone at a single table.) Like many, I have been forced to consider the value of in-person classes in light of the opportunity to offer my courses in a virtual, asynchronous mode. If I preferred, I could record lectures, design quizzes and essay assignments, and grade student papers without requiring face-to-face interactions—and I might be able to teach a great deal of American literary history in this way. But I have bristled against this brave new world. I cannot see myself primarily as a deliverer of academic content to individual consumers. Instead, I am trying to be an intellectual facilitator who fosters more immediate exchanges between students. I want my students to speak (not merely to listen and take notes), and I want them to develop personal relationships with their classmates.

A typical discussion group in my classes comprises six or seven students. One in each group is designated the leader, and I inform leaders of their roles about a week in advance so that they can prepare. Group discussions begin with a quick round of introductions (names are important), and last for about 25

minutes—one-third of a 75-minute class. Most important, I do not "sit in" on these discussions. While I may overhear bits of conversation, I do not spy or supervise. At the end of the discussion, I ask each group leader for a thread or theme of particular interest that arose, and I write it on the board. I answer questions (correcting misreadings when necessary), and I lead a larger, full-class discussion with the time remaining.

The results have been overwhelming: again and again, my students tell me that getting to know their peers and actively sharing ideas have been some of their most valuable experiences in college. Students who usually never speak in class find themselves chatting frequently about literature.

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In favoring discussion over lecture, I have been influenced by the work of other scholars and teachers, especially that of Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan.[1] But the greatest influence, for me, has been Margaret Fuller. In the past, I often struggled to teach Fuller's work, particularly because her most commonly assigned Transcendentalist writings—"The Great Lawsuit" (1843) and its book-length expansion, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845)—are "difficult"; mystical and allusive, they repeatedly reference texts from classic and modern European literary history that are generally unfamiliar to American college students today. I used to spend a lot of class time explaining the significance of figures such as Germaine de Staël or Abelard and Heloise, explanations that never struck a chord.

What made a difference to students was when I revealed that Fuller was known as a famously brilliant and entertaining *conversationalist*—most notably through the weekly "Conversation" subscription series for women she hosted in Boston between 1839 and 1844 in Elizabeth Palmer Peabody's Transcendentalist bookstore. Participants included such frequently anthologized figures as Lydia Maria Child, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Julia Ward Howe, and over those five years nearly a hundred Conversations occurred. Fuller made it clear that she was not taking the position of a lecturer or tutor; as Nancy Craig Simmons notes, "she defined her role not as teacher but *facilitator*."[2] Part seminar and part salon, a Fuller-led Conversation was typically a two-hour-long discussion centered upon a single topic, with themes ranging from Greek mythology to the fine arts to ethics. The effect was profound. "In no way was Margaret's supremacy so evident as in the impulse she gave to the minds of younger

women," reflected attendee Caroline Wells Healey Dall.[3] Those who joined these Conversations often reported that they were intellectually transformative—even life-changing.[4]

Fuller was convinced that the young women in her circle had more to gain from expressing their own developing thoughts than from ingesting the polished statements of an eloquent lecturer (someone like Ralph Waldo Emerson). Aware that many might want to subscribe to her Conversations merely as passive auditors, she insisted that taking an active part was key: "No one will be forced, but those who do not talk will not derive the same advantages with those who openly state their impressions and consent to learn by blundering."[5] "I know what *I* think," she told one group. "I want to find out what *you* think."[6]

I have tried to take a similar approach, allowing students to stumble through—rather than dictating my own professorial assessment of—assigned texts. This has occasioned a change in the very *meaning* of my teaching practice; I have become more invested in getting my students to think out loud than in getting them to memorize facts or to craft critical analyses. As a result, my movement toward small group discussions has gone hand-in-hand with my heightened reliance on self-evaluated class participation grades.[7] Participation, in other words, is essential; it is at the core of what we do.

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Margaret Fuller's Conversation series certainly influenced her composition of "The Great Lawsuit," the long essay she published in *The Dial* in 1843, which she then expanded into *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* two years later. And many scholars have suggested that Fuller's texts are somehow fundamentally "conversational."[8] In the early years of her career, before she began writing books of her own, Fuller served as the "recorder" of Bronson Alcott's *Conversations with Children on the Gospels* (1837) and as the English translator of Johann Peter Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe* (1839). And when she took a job as a columnist for the *New-York Tribune* in 1844, she insisted that "newspaper writing is next door to conversation, and should be conducted on the same principles."[9]

One of the greatest challenges posed by this conversational element is its ephemerality. Unlike printed volumes, which might rest on bookshelves for centuries, spoken utterances (at least prior to the advent of sound reproduction

technology) vanish immediately. While some participants in Fuller's Conversations occasionally took detailed notes, the great majority of them were unrecorded. And even the pieces we have are poor indications of the actual experiences. As one attendee reflected, "any attempt to report her conversations seems to me like sampling the house by the bricks."[10]

This ineffable quality of the conversational style partly explains why Fuller's writing can appear "difficult." Emerging from a dialogic, associative, and immediate context, it rarely fits into our conventional categories for popular literary genres (the lyric poem, the short story, the personal essay, etc.). And students looking for a feminist polemic in "The Great Lawsuit" or *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* are usually disappointed. Fuller never explicitly argues on behalf of our modern notions of gender equality. Instead, she offers a succession of anecdotes and advocates the removal of "arbitrary barriers," imploring her readers not to impose artificial limits on the cognitive development of women.[11]

I try to keep this in mind when encouraging my students to speak at length. My initial fear regarding in-class discussion groups was that an unsupervised 25-minute conversation among six undergraduates would simply be too long. Most students aren't especially chatty; would this be an exercise in painfully long silences? Would they reach any valuable conclusions about the text—conclusions they might write down and record? Or would they meander aimlessly?

I have observed an interesting phenomenon. In most groups, the leader will begin by asking pointed questions about the required reading. The discussion might move along for a few minutes, but it will quickly become apparent that several group members either haven't done the reading or remain too shy to offer an opinion on the subject. At some point, the leader will feel stifled, and the conversation will drift to the topical—movies, video games, current events. This may not have much to do with nineteenth-century American literature, but more students will become engaged and begin talking to their classmates. And then, almost as if by magic, the conversation will find its way back to the text before the 25-minute mark. Someone will make a connection, and the assigned reading will suddenly seem more relevant and contemporary than it had at the beginning of the class. Students, for example, might find themselves chatting about notable women in the news, such as Kamala Harris or Caitlin Clark, whose situation may not relate directly to Margaret Fuller's. But then someone will realize that the titling a book *Woman*

in the Nineteenth Century, in 1845, is the equivalent of saying "Woman in the Twenty-First Century" today. Fuller wasn't trying to be a pedantic historian; she was trying—*as we are in class*—to use historical examples in order to understand our most pressing contemporary issues.

Fuller didn't want to teach her Conversation participants; she wanted "to rouse their latent powers."[12] I have been especially driven by this desire. Students can learn quite a lot about American literature on their computers or on their phones. But they might not learn what they think until they exercise their thinking out loud with each other.

ENDNOTES

[1] Buurma and Heffernan's *The Teaching Archive: A New History for Literary Study* (U of Chicago P, 2021) contains a now-viral declaration: "Perhaps singularly among the disciplines, literary study is enacted rather than rehearsed in classrooms; the answer to the question 'Did I miss anything last week?' is truly 'Yes—and you missed it forever'" (4).

[2] Nancy Craig Simmons, "Margaret Fuller's Boston Conversations: The 1839–1840 Series," *Studies in the American Renaissance*, 1994, pp. 195–226; 200 (emphasis added). As Megan Marshall notes in *Margaret Fuller: A New American Life* (Houghton Mifflin, 2013), "the Conversations were more of a club than a class" (136).

[3] Caroline W. Healey, *Margaret and Her Friends; or, Ten Conversations with Margaret Fuller upon the Mythology of the Greeks and Its Expression in Art, Held at the House of the Rev. George Ripley, Bedford Place, Boston, Beginning March 1, 1841* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1895), 13.

[4] "I never heard, read of, or imagined a conversation at all equal to this we have now heard," declared one participant, quoted in *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, 3 vols. (Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Company, 1852), 1:338. "I found myself in a new world of thought," recalled another. "I was no longer the limitation of myself, but I felt that the whole wealth of the universe was open to me." Ednah Dow Cheney, *Reminiscences of Ednah Chow Cheney (born Littlehale)* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1902), 205. As Horace Greely—whose wife, Mary, participated—later reflected of the Conversations, in 1868, "there are still many living who gratefully recall them as the starting-point and incitement of a new and nobler existence." Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life: including reminiscences of American politics and politicians, from the opening of the Missouri contest to the downfall of slavery* (New York: J. B. Ford and Co., 1868), 174.

[5] Margaret Fuller, *Collected Writings*, edited by Brigitte Bailey, Noelle A. Baker, and Megan Marshall (Library of America, 2025), 732.
[6] *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, 1:346 (emphases added).
[7] In this I have been greatly influenced by Alanna Gillis's "Reconceptualizing Participation Grading as Skill Building," *Teaching Sociology*, vol. 47, 2019, pp. 10–21.
[8] Christina Zwarg long ago observed that "one cannot survey her career without noticing her incessant theoretical return to the process of conversation." Zwarg, *Feminist Conversations: Fuller, Emerson, and the Play of Reading* (Cornell UP, 1995), 3. Cynthia Davis, writing of the various literary genres that populate *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, has suggested that the book most closely formally approximates Fuller's Conversations, offering an interactive collection of abstracted voices. Davis, *Bodily and Narrative Forms: The Influence of Medicine on American Literature, 1845–1915* (Stanford UP, 2000), 74. And in B*right Circle: Five Remarkable Women in the Age of Transcendentalism* (Oxford UP, 2024), Randall Fuller notes that Woman in the Nineteenth Century "rustles with the spoken word: with dialogues, speeches by various personae, with the associative back and forth of conversation" (247).
[9] Fuller, *Collected Writings*, 506.
[10] Cheney, *Reminiscences*, 206. In *Prophets, Publicists, and Parasites: Antebellum Print Culture and the Rise of the Critic* (U of Massachusetts P, 2020), Adam Gordon similarly argues that while Fuller was an especially gifted critic for the *New-York Tribune*, the ephemerality of the newspaper article meant that her journalistic contributions were never considered the literary equal of bound volumes aimed at posterity (163–164).
[11] Fuller, *Collected Writings*, 302.
[12] Fuller, *Collected Writings*, 303.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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