In Dispiriting Times, It Helps to Get ‘Lost in Thought’

Don’t let the complexities of the fall semester amid Covid-19 overwhelm all the good things that drove you to your discipline in the first place

By James M. Lang

JULY 28, 2020
For many academics, summer usually means glorious, unscheduled time for research, writing, and reflection. But not this summer. Instead, Covid-19 has forced most of us into a narrow chute, trying to master bewilderingly complex logistics as we hurtle toward the fall semester.

Every conversation I have about teaching illuminates just how flummoxed academics feel this summer in struggling to design courses that accommodate all of the conditions outlined by campus administrators and state officials. Even if we succeed in developing a robust, adaptable model — in which some students take courses on the campus and some remotely — we face the prospect that everything could change again in the middle of the semester. Smart thinkers are recommending “resilient pedagogy” — a course-design approach that aims to help
faculty members teach through a major disruption (like, say, Covid-19). It’s an excellent strategy, but it still demands lots of thinking and work about course logistics.

Focusing so much of our energies on myriad logistical and pedagogical problems — without any sense that they will be resolved in a satisfying way — can be dispiriting. It doesn’t help that we can’t gather over drinks or meals and be buoyed by one another’s presence, as we often are in a crisis.

So we are facing wicked problems, mostly alone, and we need solutions in a hurry. Yet in the push to find them this summer, it’s easy to lose sight of something else we need: the passion that animates our teaching in normal circumstances and lights the fires of inspiration in our students. All of this hyperfocus on mastering the complexities of the fall semester threatens to overwhelm what drove us to our disciplines in the first place: our love for the laboratory, for a beautiful theorem, for an artfully composed piece of poetry.

Losing track of those passions will turn our fall teaching into a mechanical exercise. Now more than ever, we need to keep our disciplinary passions in full view.

At a moment when I most needed a reminder of that, it arrived on my desk in the form of a new book, *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasure of an Intellectual Life*, written by Zena Hitz and published in May by Princeton University Press. A tutor at St. John’s College in Annapolis, Md., Hitz brings to the book not only her academic training in classics and ancient philosophy, but also an open-minded interest in a diverse range of great books, including the writings of Malcolm X, the nonfiction of Dorothy Day, and the novels of Italian writer Elena Ferrante.

*Lost in Thought* consists largely of admiring encounters with literary works, woven
together with reflections on the virtues of learning and the intellectual life. She revisits Aristotle’s famous argument about contemplation: that of all the different goods of life — fame, fortune, friendship, education — contemplation is the most perfect to pursue. The word contemplation, on its own, conjures an image of someone just sitting and thinking big thoughts. But Hitz argues that contemplation doesn’t always look like that; it can take “the form of learning,” on your own or in a classroom. Humans are born to learn, she writes, and a flourishing life is one that recognizes and prioritizes the art of learning.

In short, the work we do in higher education has the potential to help both faculty members and students to pursue their best possible lives.

What drew me especially to her arguments in this summer of crises was her chapter on learning as a refuge from our material conditions. “The inwardness of the mind at leisure,” she writes, “unlocks the dignity that is so often denied or diminished by social life and social circumstances.” No matter our circumstances, we can escape from our temporal, spatial, and social limitations, and engage in conversation with writers and thinkers from every condition of life.

More important, the refuge we find in stories and ideas can become a place from which we gain new, productive, and consoling perspectives on our circumstances, and on the fundamental questions that confront all humans. Through acts of contemplative learning, we are able to “recover fuller and truer ways of thinking about ourselves, and thus to find fuller and truer ways of being.”

Lost in Thought is at its best when it grounds arguments like these in textual readings of writers and thinkers across the ages. Hitz is a careful and generous reader, and familiar texts sprung to new life for me under the guidance of her pen. The book takes an unfortunate turn away from such readings in its final sections,
offering quick and largely unsupported arguments about the lamentable state of higher education today. In the final pages, I felt like my brilliant and amiable intellectual partner sat down on the porch with a whiskey and decided to unload a little bit on some tired targets.

But her concluding pages didn’t negate for me the value of *Lost in Thought* in a difficult time for any academic. We are so focused on managing the complexities of the fall semester right now that it’s easy to lose track of the reasons we followed a pathway into academe — namely, our love of learning, our passion for our subjects, and our desire for conversations about the fundamental problems and deep questions of our disciplines.

I read Hitz’s book on a weeklong visit to my father, which provided me and my family the last opportunity to say goodbye to his wife (the woman he married a few years after my mother died), who was in the final stages of terminal cancer. Each day brought new emotional challenges, as well as difficult conversations about how my 83-year-old father would live when he was widowed for the second time.

On our trip we stayed in the house of an old family friend, which was located on a lagoon. I spent an hour or two every morning sitting on a chair next to the lagoon, reading *Lost in Thought*, pausing frequently for reflection as I observed a heron in flight or a passing boat. I thought about literature and the role that it played in shaping and helping me understand my life. I was reminded of books that I had read, and I discovered books I had not yet read. I reflected upon writing projects I might undertake, and new approaches to support the love of learning in my students.

On that otherwise sad and stressful trip, I spent a little time every day lost in thought — reconnecting with the passions that drove me to become a writer and teacher of
literature and writing. That time was incredibly precious to me in such difficult circumstances.

Of course we are all in tough circumstances now, and we need to do the difficult, practical work of planning for the fall. But Hitz’s book proved a salutary reminder for me, and may for other readers as well, that we should try to make at least a little space this summer for the contemplative learning that drew us into the life of the mind. We will most certainly need that passion to sustain us in the coming months.

If you have questions or concerns about this article, please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.

James M. Lang

James M. Lang is a professor of English and director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College, in Worcester, Mass. He is the author of Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons From the Science of Learning. His Twitter handle is @LangOnCourse.