

Fall 2017, Issue 1  
**LEARNING LOOP**  
A Teaching and Learning Lab Newsletter

## Introduction

Instructional Moves (IM), an online, multimedia platform spotlighting great teaching across Harvard, is officially up and running. “Instructional moves” are defined as high-leverage teaching strategies relevant across educational contexts and informed by teaching and learning research. Videos bring together classroom footage and reflection from Harvard instructors and students. The videos are supplemented with noteworthy research, tips for implementation in diverse settings, and further online resources. The current modules focus on essential skills in building community, lecturing interactively, and facilitating discussions.



Principal investigator Meira Levinson and project lead Josh Bookin unveiled Instructional Moves at a launch celebration at Gutman Library on September 12, 2017. In his remarks, Dean Ryan discussed how this project is a manifestation of HGSE’s commitment in “Learning to Change the World,” both through our own teaching and in our impact on the field. Levinson and Bookin provided a brief tutorial of the website, and IM’s content developers were on hand with tablets and laptops to assist attendees in exploring the website’s features. The event additionally provided a casual outlet for instructors from across the University to come together, make professional connections, and talk shop.

**CASE STUDY: Todd Rakoff**



## **Pressing Students for Accuracy and Expanded Reasoning**

Leading a rich discussion, especially in a large class, requires exceptionally nimble processing on the part of the facilitator. Students may offer responses in rapid-fire succession, often pulling the conversation in different directions, and these responses can run the gamut in quality, accuracy, clarity, and relevance. One student's contribution may be divergent but illuminating, while another's could be just plain wrong but a powerful springboard for clarifying misconceptions nonetheless.

Considering the sheer number of happenings in such a teaching environment, instructors can become understandably dizzied by all the action. This might mean accepting responses without discernment. But, as law professor Todd Rakoff expertly demonstrates in "[Pressing Students for Accuracy and Expanded Reasoning](#)," failing to assume a role of discernment has implications not just for that one student's understanding but for every student in the room. While Rakoff's approach is considerably gentler than how we might picture law professors interrogating students in pressure cooker classrooms, it is still rigorous. Moreover, it is instructive. Through a series of clarifying, narrowing questions, Rakoff compels students to consider their thinking more critically while simultaneously socializing them for the detail-oriented nature of lawyers' work. It's a powerful exchange where discipline and pedagogical decision-making become meaningfully linked, all in the spirit of leading students to self-discovery.

Nonetheless, thorny pedagogical dilemmas can persist even after decades in the business of managing large-enrollment discussions. Rakoff offers a glimpse into the types of questions that most concern him: "If a student is obscure or is not saying something very clearly, you then have to decide, is it important to let the student say it the way the student is saying it? Or is it important to interrupt enough that the other people in the room hear what you consider to be right?" Similarly, when a response is ambiguous, do we simply give that student the benefit of the doubt and serve up a response ostensibly adapted to the topic at hand? If the contributor is especially introverted, how might we push them to explain their thinking without discouraging future participation altogether? As Rakoff reminds us, there really is no formula for this kind of quick decision-making: "You just have to decide real fast which way you want to do it." Nevertheless, if your end goal is to inspire students to think more critically, then [Pressing Students for Accuracy and Expanded Reasoning](#) must be in your toolbox.

## CASE STUDY: Bob Kegan



### **Regulating the Flow of Energy in the Classroom**

Research has shown that the average student's attention span in a conventional lecture setting is around 15 minutes. This reality doesn't mean we need to abandon the lecture as an instructional method, but it does have significant implications for what it takes to make lecturing an effective learning experience for students. Having taught countless long lectures in his illustrious career at HGSE, Professor Bob Kegan is intimately aware of what it takes to solicit and sustain students' attention. Even with the energy, excitement, and humor he brings to his teaching, Kegan has found it essential to strategically intersperse learning activities throughout class sessions to keep students awake, alert, and engaged. In addition to this advance planning, he keeps a finger on the class's pulse and adapts approaches when he senses attention waning.

Kegan calls this "[regulating the flow of energy](#)." It requires rethinking the role of the lecturer completely. But such a rethinking does not represent a depreciation of what the lecturer has to offer. Rather, it means leveraging those offerings more intentionally so students can really get the most out of them. In Kegan's practice, this amounts to shorter bursts of lecture punctuated by [individual reflection](#), [pair-shares](#), small group work, and a smattering of [other collaborative activities](#) that provide students the time and space to wrestle with concepts and apply them to new situations. As Kegan frames it: "It's a lost opportunity if we're only talking about how to keep your balance on a bicycle. Why not bring in a bunch of bicycles and put people on them, even if it's just for a minute or two?" The result is a class that feels more like a lively, intimate seminar than it does a lecture in HGSE's largest lecture hall. Engagement runs high, penetrating conversations abound, concepts come alive, and Kegan's tempered insights tie it all together. As one student reflected on the experience: "You don't take two hours out of your life to sit and just listen. You take two hours out of your life to work on something."

Why don't more lecturers approach their lecture courses this way? Kegan posits that it's mainly about control. "One of the great things about standing up and just giving a lecture," he reasons, "is you have control over every minute." Relinquishing this control poses considerable uncertainty -- uncertainty lecturers might not feel completely comfortable confronting. But, as Kegan urges, instructors can gradually become adept at ceding control a bit at a time, building skills and confidence in sharing ownership with students without losing control of the class session. In doing so, it can create a space where students have the attention needed to focus

on key concepts and the opportunities needed to make those concepts their own.

## CASE STUDY: **Christina Villarreal**



### **Using the Physical Space to Support a Democratic Philosophy**

Lecturer Christina Villarreal continually finds thoughtful ways to bridge pedagogy and content in her classroom. In practice, this means that the instructional decisions Christina makes and the learning activities she engineers often speak directly to the content covered in her Ethnic Studies in Education course. For example, to support the course goals of elevating marginalized voices and challenging dominant, Eurocentric narratives, Christina cultivates a classroom space where oft-silenced voices can be heard, conventional wisdom interrogated, and alternative textual perspectives lifted. Sometimes Christina's pedagogy-content connections are direct, other times they are more subtle.

In ["Using the Physical Space to Support a Democratic Philosophy,"](#) Christina uncovers and critiques the ways teachers physically signal their authority over students. A typical classroom with desks arranged in rows all angled toward a teacher at the front of the room, for example, can have significant implications for how teacher-student dynamics are negotiated in the classroom. In contrast, everyone in Ethnic Studies, Christina included, sits in an inclusive circle. The result is twofold: reimagining the teacher's role and affording students greater ownership of their learning experiences. By joining students physically at their level, Christina challenges traditional teacher-student hierarchies and deemphasizes her own expertise. As Christina explains it, "I sit with them in the circle to communicate that I'm here for you, but I'm also here with you."

Beyond its symbolic merit, however, the intimate layout affords students greater ownership of their learning, what Christina refers to as "agentizing the students." It works to foster a close-knit community where students are more likely to open up and put their own experiences into dialogue with course material. Once some of the focus is taken off the instructor, students can begin to engage more authentically with one another rather than directing all of their thoughts to the person in charge. In this setting, students "feel empowered to...move the discussion where they want it to go." Communication patterns become natural, with Christina nodding or making eye contact to guide student contributions, while she herself can reach new understandings too as she assumes a more collaborative role. These new takes on classroom norms, some more subtle than others, bring to life the democratic philosophies intrinsic to ethnic studies more generally. Even in classrooms where much of the furniture is immobile, there are ways to leverage this theme of challenging the inherent teacher-student hierarchy by employing pedagogical strategies -- including small group conversations, pair-shares, or innovative discussion platforms -- that take some of the focus off of an "all-knowing" professor

and put learning back into the hands of students.

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## Resources



Check out [Instructional Moves](#). Explore the site's three modules: [Building Community](#), [Lecturing Interactively](#), and [Facilitating Discussions](#). If a particular instructor's practice most resonates with you, explore the rest of their moves by accessing IM's individual faculty pages. These pages contain an archive of move videos, supplementary information on the professor and the course in focus, and footage of the full class session featured in move videos which showcase the instructor's practices in their natural contexts.

This year at HGSE's [Teaching & Learning Week](#) (October 13-20), IM will host an interactive session on Thursday, October 19 (1:30-3:00; Gutman Library LaunchPad, 3rd floor). Attendees will get a feel for IM more generally and, working in collaborative groups, explore a move of interest in greater depth while considering its implementation in specific instructional contexts.

Instructional Moves is currently expanding. We plan to refine existing modules, build new ones, and grow support for our resources. Your [feedback](#) is much-appreciated. Another creative way to offer your input is to participate in the [Make Your Move](#) challenge -- try applying a particular move in your classroom and let us know how it went.

One valuable instructional move is soliciting mid-course feedback from your students. The TLL has created customizable [qualitative](#) and [quantitative](#) mid-course feedback survey templates, and we are available to help you think through how to best gather feedback to fit your needs. Please contact Josh Bookin ([josh\\_bookin@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:josh_bookin@gse.harvard.edu)) for assistance.

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