

Writing in PME

3rd Quarter, 2020

Faculty Spotlight



Carolyn Halladay is a senior lecturer in the National Security Affairs (NSA) Department at Naval Post-Graduate School and the academic associate for the Center of Homeland Defense and Security (CHDS). She also co-teaches a course in Research and Writing in Homeland Security. A historian and lawyer, Dr. Halladay's academic focus is contemporary Central Europe. Before joining NPS, she was a lecturer at Pennsylvania State Erie, Behrend College, and The George Washington University, and a federal tax prosecutor in the U.S. Department of Justice.

Dr. Halladay's first goal in teaching writing at NPS is demystifying the process, since students often believe it is unlearnable. "I tell them the opposite is true. Lyrical prose aside, we can all learn to write effectively; it's a matter of overcoming the initial terror of putting words on the page," she explains. To that end, she encourages students to "start where they are," a turn of phrase borrowed from her CHDS colleague, Chris Bellavita, and integrates their personal experiences into the classroom via conversations and free-writing exercises. For voice, she advises students to let go of sounding "academic" and instead, to write as they speak, passing on advice from an early journalism mentor: "Write so you cannot be misunderstood." When asked what she loves most about teaching at NPS, she insists, "When the light goes on and a student understands. We ask them to do something very difficult—produce a capstone, thesis, or dissertation within a very short time period. Overwhelmingly, our students succeed. I think that's amazing."

Dr. Halladay is this quarter's faculty spotlight given her teaching philosophy and dedication to the intellectual growth of NPS students, along with many other contributions to the NSA Department, CHDS, and Center for Civil-Military Relations.

As the Fourth of July approaches, exigency and agency are important concepts to remember. The Continental Army showed that self-agency is essential to learning and learning is a process often occurring under the most exigent circumstances. Many PME faculty have rightly shifted to a process based pedagogy from a product oriented one. Implementing a process based approach often leads to problems with two concepts, exigency and agency. Exigency helps the student identify what is important at a particular moment in the process. Student agency ensures the writing project is completed under the student's power and perseverance. Students often struggle with exigency in the writing process because they lack a clear sense of how a process unfolds; faculty, often experienced in the writing process, have difficulty explaining their intuitive knowledge. The disjuncture between student reality and faculty expectation can lead to frustration and resentment for both. Faculty can facilitate exigency by taking the time to orient students to deliverable requirements and explain how each step leads to or enables later steps. Even a few minutes explaining a process prevents myriad problems. Agency can be unduly influenced through the pressures of exigency when faculty fail to imagine themselves in the student's reality; usurping student agency leads to diminished student learning. In those moments faculty feedback becomes monarchic, decreatory and overly directive, lacking explanation. Faculty who embrace the pressures of exigency while employing strategies that nurture student agency often facilitate deeper learning and form a greater rapport with their students.

Tip for Teaching Writing

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