

# On in-ness: What Cégep teaching keeps teaching me

## Sur l'appartenance : ce que l'enseignement au cégep continue de m'apprendre

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Article abstract

A first-person essay on the ways that Cégep teaching is different from teaching at a university. The reflection explores how belonging — an "in-ness" — is enacted within a creative arts department by focusing on various experiences from being hired to navigating teaching online during the pandemic. By doing so, the author recognizes how they come to understand and promulgate belonging in the classroom.



# ON IN-NESS: WHAT CÉGEP TEACHING KEEPS TEACHING ME

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**ABSTRACT.** A first-person essay on the ways that Cégep teaching is different from teaching at a university. The reflection explores how belonging — an “in-ness” — is enacted within a creative arts department by focusing on various experiences from being hired to navigating teaching online during the pandemic. By doing so, the author recognizes how they come to understand and promulgate belonging in the classroom.

## **SUR L'APPARTENANCE : CE QUE L'ENSEIGNEMENT AU CÉGEP CONTINUE DE M'APPRENDRE**

**RÉSUMÉ.** Un essai à la première personne sur les différences entre l'enseignement au cégep et à l'université. Cette réflexion explore la manière dont un sentiment d'appartenance est mis en œuvre au sein d'un département des arts créatifs en se concentrant sur différentes expériences, de l'embauche à la navigation de l'enseignement en ligne pendant la pandémie. Ce faisant, l'auteure reconnaît comment ils en viennent à comprendre et à promulguer le sentiment d'appartenance dans la salle de classe.

“You’re in!” an enthusiastic voice announced on the other line. I recognized the voice because I spoke with its owner a few days ago, in an interview for a teaching post.

My interview was at the end of a heat wave in September. I sat at a round table in an HR office, sweating, and fumbling to provide cogent answers on how I would teach conceptual art and Sophie Calle to students who may be in the Arts, Literature, and Communication program, but whose interest stopped at the scheduling of their timetable. Somehow, it all came together.

“It’s your new chair from Arts, Literature, and Communication,” they continued.

“I got ahead of myself, but you got the job.”

I collected my bearings, standing in the narrow gap between my bed and desk, elated, and dizzy from toddler-induced sleep deprivation.

“Your pedagogical methods really impressed us, Magda. You begin on Monday. I know it’ll be the 3rd week of class, but I’ve contacted the teachers that previously taught your courses and asked them to send you their materials. Everyone will help you as much as they can, and you’ll see, our students are the sweetest. They know a replacement is coming. You will fit right in.”

I had four days to prepare for three new courses in a new department in a new academic system.

“Don’t worry. Most new hires have this initiation – an immediate dive into the deep end.”

She wasn’t kidding.

A similar story plays out with most of my friends who begin their Cégep careers: perpetually catching up, reading as much as we can about what and how we are supposed to teach. Graduate studies prepare us to be researchers, not educators.

Yet, even with an abrupt start, new hires flourish because of the resolute support among Cégep teachers. Unlike in the university system, new faculty are not seen as expendable transient outsiders. The environment doesn’t depend on competition and scarcity (Bowering & Reed, 2021).

The onset of emergency online teaching in 2020 echoed this dive into the deep end – my department came together in a manner highlighting care, patience, and optimism towards each other and our students.

This experience revealed what kind of teacher I want to be, how I want to engage students, and how the collectivity between teachers extends to our relationships with the students. As such, I yielded to the potential of a Cégep classroom: a space that facilitates and encourages an exploration of one’s interest and practice within the program, that can still fulfill the program’s competencies.<sup>1</sup> My focus became more workshop-style and process-oriented. Pragmatically, that meant, for example, changing my rubrics to recognize the importance of production and technical mistakes, mishaps, etc. Reflections on the process also became an indispensable, validated, and graded part of the work.

Patience and mindfulness became paramount in this generative approach. I clarified to my students that my questions and comments on their work were not meant as interrogations but rather an engagement in critical dialogue; a way of showing curiosity and thinking through something with them (Massumi, 2010). We don’t learn by slogging through an assignment for a grade. Or, if we do, at

best we learn the tactics of what will get us the grade we want. It teaches us how to manage the work we are obliged to do rather than the work we want to be doing. The pandemic allowed me to lead by example and enable my students to reflect on “what brought them to their work [and] what they brought into their work” (Ahmed, 2021). To be “into” something is a movement and action towards that something, to support it and to also be supported by it — in this case, the Cégep community of learning.

By way of Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), it is my responsibility to furnish our classroom space with a table that is large enough and comfortable enough for every student’s movement. This was accentuated in 2020-2021 at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, when differences between us were heightened. While studying at Cégep, most students are still living at home but need their own space and independence. This often-unwelcome blurring of home/school space became apparent during the pandemic. Students were calling into class on their phones from their cars, unable to go anywhere, turning on their mic only to immediately turn it off again when competing with their home soundscape. There was no table for us to sit at together and orient ourselves, so I asked them to imagine one. The question that remote learning forced us to face still stands today: how can we sustain an equitable space of “you’re in” in a classroom that is an abstract space of avatars and small rectangles monitoring our position in front of a screen? Even if implausible, we keep experimenting.

“You’re in” is a simple phrase, yet expansive in belonging. This in-ness is what Cégep teaching keeps teaching me.

## NOTES

1. Programs have specific competencies that students must acquire. A competency is: “an ability to act, succeed, and progress that allows one to apply in varied spheres of activity forms of knowledge (content knowledge, skills, attitudes, etc.) acquired in a specific context.” (Côté, 2015, p.5)

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