FACULTY VOICES

We asked 11 faculty members about inspiration, creativity, and innovation. Here’s what they had to say.

Faculty illustrations by Frances Pitcheelli McCormick

(“Faculty Voices” is an excerpt from the spring “Creativity and Innovation” issue of Andover magazine. For more, visit http://www.andover.edu/about/newsroom/themagazine.)

JOEL JACOB
Instructor, Mathematics

At most liberal arts schools, limited connections exist between mathematics and other fields. In my high school and college education, the offerings for “applied” mathematics courses meant taking a computer science, physics, or statistics class.

Here at Andover, the educators at the Addison Gallery and the Peabody Museum opened my eyes to other possibilities. My students build real-world connections between mathematics, art, and history; their mathematics education is a vehicle for connecting them to our campus, our school’s history, and the material-rich troves in our institutions.

These opportunities are as abstract and rigorous as a course that purely teaches proof writing, logical reasoning, and equation solving in the traditional classroom. However, I would argue that students build deeper and stronger connections to math when they are learning experientially. Can they hold an artifact and articulate a mathematical argument in context? Can they explain the importance of a mathematical principle using the tools and space around them? If the answer is a resounding “yes,” then those students are one step closer to becoming tinkerers and innovators instead of mere doers.

REEM HUSSEIN
Instructor, Biology

I was born in Sudan but moved to Kuwait as a very young child. There, until the equivalent of ninth grade, I attended a British international school with students from all over the world. My mother tongue is Arabic, while English was the language of my formal education. My parents strove to maintain our Sudanese culture while we grew up in Kuwait and had British cultural values emphasized at school. In those formative years—my time in Kuwait ended abruptly with the first Gulf War—I heard historical events recounted in different languages and from different perspectives. I heard history from the colonist, the colonized, the aggressor, the defeated, and those eager to stay above the fray.

Growing up the way I did helped me realize early on that history can present two sides, probably more, to the same story—the story of us and the story of the other—but the history I lived taught me to stop being shocked when I learned there is always more to the story.

Even at that young age, I learned the benefits of being not just multilingual but also conversant with others based on different perspectives and experiences. The best of my peers, because of their ability to listen, empathize, and learn from those different from them, were “citizens of the world,” eager to contribute to the “global village” long before these were clichés and the Internet and mass and social media made the world so much smaller. Their example served me well as I bounced back to Sudan, then to Malaysia, then Egypt, all before coming to the U.S. for college.

As a teacher, I work to prepare students to be ready for and open to these challenges so they do not find themselves shut off from the world around them educationally, culturally, socially, or, eventually, professionally.
CLYFE BECKWITH  
Instructor, Physics

Oh, boy. What doesn’t inspire me? Even thinking about how I should answer this question inspires me. Being able to hear the train a mile away down the hill when I am leaving Gelb makes me wonder about how the sound must have been bent by a cold layer of air—will it snow soon? Watching the effects of a sunrise by the sinking shadow line from the top of a golden-orange deciduous tree in late fall—what will the day bring? Yesterday the leaves got caught in a swirling wind and settled by my doorstep; today a stronger wind blows, but the leaves stay put. What changed? Hearing a student’s excitement about her success in solving a problem or the dismay of a student as he describes his apparent lack of success in getting the answer, neither realizing how far they have come in six short weeks of instruction. Practicing with the volleyball team day in and day out, watching team members form familial bonds so deep that they respond as much to body language as they do to spoken words, and observing proud parents absorb how much their child has developed into a mature adult—part of a team, part of a game, part of life.

Inspiration lurks around every corner on this campus, like chaos theory, where just one small difference in input can result in a completely new outcome with the same conditions. I teach the same classes every year and yet not one of them has ever been the same. Every day brings new adventures, and I find immense joy in making new connections, finding ways to thread seemingly separate ideas, defying the odds of making something work. I challenge myself to find the positive; the best day ever is when I can make someone smile.

CATHERINE CARTER  
Instructor, Classics

I was writing a paper for a summer course on Sallust, a Roman historian, and my search in the OWHL catalog returned an interesting hit shelved in “Sp. Col.” That turned out to be our Special Collections, housed in locked cabinets on the second floor of the library. One shelf held a 1526 edition of what purports to be a speech lambasting Cicero: *Oratio contra Ciceronem*.

This winter, with help from Director of Archives and Special Collections Paige Roberts, my Latin 300 students will take a short break from reading Cicero to investigate this text, begin to learn how to decipher manuscript abbreviations, and undoubtedly relish its gratuitous digs at the mighty orator. They are already familiar with the aspects of Cicero’s character that emerge from his own speeches; the *Oratio* rounds out the picture by illuminating some contemporary criticism, and this helps shape the lens through which we read his oratory and interpret his political influence.

I suspect that my students will respond with enthusiasm—and empathy—to the accusations of pomposity and verbosity, but I also expect that this exercise will ultimately whet their appetites for Cicero.

DEREK JACOBY  
Instructor, Music

For a composer, the creative process can often be something of a mystery, a particular combination of inspiration, hard work, gut feelings, and experience. Having to articulate and defend aesthetic principles is not easy in an abstract language such as music.

I have found that the act of teaching itself has served as a great inspiration for my compositional work, in the sense that it has most effectively made me better at my craft. Working with such bright students has compelled me to distill and organize my own thoughts on an abstract and subjective topic to a much greater extent. This necessary clarity, developed originally for the student, is invaluable when I apply it to my own music. Over time, it has given me a better understanding of music composition and of the application of creativity, which has allowed me to see my own compositional work in a clearer light.
CHRISTINA LANDOLT ’02
Instructor, Music

I am most inspired by the students who look me in the eye and say, “I don’t want to be here.” Most often what they mean is that their previous experience studying music was focused on a style of music they disliked and that they’re not thrilled at the idea of being graded on a subject in which they believe one is either gifted or not. Yet when I ask what they listened to on their iPhones on the way to class, every one of them has an answer. Then we have a way to begin.

This fall, it was Taylor Swift. You can’t imagine my joy when, at Family Weekend, a mother told me that her daughter had interrupted their conversation in the car to crank up Taylor Swift’s newest single in order to explain to her mother exactly how auto-tuning and upbeat synthesized drums had helped Taylor transition into a “pop” artist—something we had discussed on the first day of class.

My favorite part of this job is convincing students that they do have a voice in music, that their observations are valid, and that they can cultivate their listening skills into a more sophisticated opinion about the aesthetics of the musical world around them. The excitement for me as a teacher is that accomplishing this goal will require me to find a different path for each and every student.

TOM HODGSON
Instructor and Interim Chair, Philosophy and Religious Studies

All truth is simple?
Wouldn’t it be nice.
But no, that can’t be right: Complete experience?
One accurate, adequate, comprehensible, coherent set of concepts? A language perfectly suited to capture it all?

No way. Lies all, illusions, dreams to put thought to sleep at the end of long days of struggle for survival, for control, for recognition, for Justice.

Another way? Question. A few [Kant-inspired questions] to start with: What can I know? For what can I hope? How shall I act? What is a human being? Find your own. Search the past for answers. Test them against direct personal experience, shared experience guided by method, logic, rational discourse about what is important. Turn today’s best answers into policies in a life, in a classroom, in an institution. ReThink, ReAct, Repeat.

DONALD SLATER
Instructor, History & Social Science; Research Scholar, Robert S. Peabody Museum of Archaeology

Like many people at Andover, at times I feel overwhelmed because I am captivated by such a variety of interests. I think, however, that there is one connecting thread that runs through the majority of my intellectual pursuits: material culture. Things. Stuff. For me, it is not the modern consumerist perspective that is interesting, but rather seeing objects as things that, like people, can have constantly evolving biographies. Material culture items can change hands, be involved in social interactions, and are modified, saved, and discarded—all the while accruing cultural, historical, emotional, and even spiritual value as interpreted by different people at different times.

Most fascinating to me, perhaps, is that within some cultures such items even transcend the mundane category of “object” and are seen as “subjects” or active social agents. As an archaeologist, using material items to help students better relate to the history and social science curriculum feels natural. And with the Addison Gallery, Peabody Museum, and Archives, Andover has perhaps the most impressive collection of material culture at any U.S. high school. Where else could I take students to connect with a silver cast by Paul Revere, an original 1661 Eliot Bible, and ancient Maya ceramics—all without leaving campus?
LIXIA MA  
Instructor and Chair, Chinese

Learning a foreign language not only opens a door to another culture, another world, it also creates a new identity and perspective. I personally went through that amazing journey while learning English at a young age, and I relish the opportunity to share the excitement of such a journey by teaching my students Chinese. From imitating the sounds, copying the characters, piecing together a sentence, students are on their way to creating brand-new worlds of their own in a different language. However, at this stage they can’t be too creative yet; what they do is follow what teachers say and what native speakers say. And when writing characters, they have to copy them stroke by stroke and get the whole word right.

Once they have the basics, they are able to freely express their thoughts in creative sentences or start to create their own writing style. I view the relationship between foundational knowledge and creativity as a coexistent entity; one without the other will be meaningless, if not useless. As a teacher, I am constantly striking a balance of the two. Have I given my students the nuts and bolts, and have I also left enough blank space for them to create their own masterpieces?

STEPHANIE CURCI  
Instructor, English

I’m inspired by how many different ways there are to teach and how different the kids are from one another and from me. In a class with 15 students, there are 15 new lenses on Goodbye Columbus or Fences or Midnight’s Children, and I never know what they will be. We’re all constantly learning from one another, and the students keep teaching me how to teach them.

In my senior elective on postcolonial India this fall, the discussion on language and power that I introduced at the beginning of the term became more resonant for all of us because my students who are bilingual or who come from multilingual countries kept pursuing it. One student’s focus on feminism in the novel pushed past my own engagement with the female characters and provoked great discussion that was sustained because it mattered so much to her.

Teaching seems to be a job where there is no “enough”: You’re never done. I find that humbling but also a great challenge, an intellectual one and a social one. When students and I find points of contact between a text, one another, and our lives inside and outside the class—our homes, our families, a French class, an economics lecture—it feels magical. That’s when the kids are excited to share but equally excited to listen and learn. When we get it right as a class, it’s amazing. I know we made it happen together, and I was the smallest part of that.

THAYER ZAEDER ’83  
Instructor, Art

In my own experiences as a teacher and an artist, inspiration comes in many forms and from many sources. It is never a static thing. Sometimes I am inspired by the work of my students as they express themselves with a boldness that I find refreshing. Other times I’m moved by the work of contemporary artists, ancient artifacts and pots, or the complex beauty in the natural world.

As fickle as inspiration can be, I return often to a few core ideas that always fuel my interest in creative exploration. As an object maker and someone involved in a 30-year affair with clay, I’m forever trying to discover vessel forms that have appealing proportions and shape. My love of the material of clay also motivates me to celebrate its tactile qualities through an exploration of surface. Somehow marrying form and surface into a compelling and well-crafted object is my inspirational ground zero.

I also believe strongly that inspiration is a natural by-product of thoughtful inquiry and endeavor in the studio. I discover so many good ideas simply by doing and being open to the possibilities that are suggested through process. For me personally, the alternatives that emerge are often better than the seed idea. As an art instructor, I try to pass on this wisdom—that inspiration can be found rather than divined.