The Editors’ Preface

On the 10th anniversary of *In Transit*, Michele Piso, Patricia Sokolski, and Jose Fabara, co-facilitators of the 2015–2016 Carnegie Seminar and editors of *In Transit*, sat down with Ros Orgel to share experiences.

Ros: Since its debut in 2005/2006, *In Transit* has really changed. That first issue was around seventy pages, the present issue is over three hundred pages. Michele, while the faculty associate and assistant editors have rotated, you’ve served as editor for many years. Can you tell us the *In Transit* story? What’s happened over the years, and why?

Jose: I’m curious, too. This volume is interestingly different from my earlier experience with *In Transit*. About ten years ago, Evelyn Burg and I wrote about Literacy and Propaganda, a reading course that had become very popular in New York City high schools through CUNY’s College Now, a dual enrollment and college-readiness program. Looking back, the evolution and growth of the journal are evident. I think our article was informative, but it did not engage the scholarship in the ways we now expect.

Michele: I hadn’t realized we’ve reached a ten-year milestone! Well, clearly, the design of the journal has changed and, yes, it’s bigger and, I hope, more inclusive. Many of our friends and colleagues have contributed to those changes, and, Ros, you’ve been there since the first days, too, so you know. The sharpened attention to scholarship—I can say a little about that. A few things happened. First, [former Vice President for Academic Affairs] Peter Katopes used to visit me early in the morning to talk about plays he’d seen over the weekend. One morning, he’s leaning against my file cabinet with a copy of the journal in his hand: “Piso,” he said, “this is okay for you and me, but for promotions and tenure, faculty need scholarship.”

Peter kind of lit a fire under us—he motivated a shift that coincided with the college-wide emphasis on the assessment of learning. We felt a responsibility to support faculty development of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)—an orientation to classroom research introduced in the Center’s Carnegie Seminar—in ways that could move their work to wider recognition and reward. The seminar was Bret’s [Eynon] brainchild, inspired by his work with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. At that time, Lee Shulman was president; Bret brought all that energy and moral commitment, really, to the Center, and got lots of us involved. Phyllis [van Slyck] was the seminar’s first co-facilitator. She was such a great mentor to me, so generous.
I was really new at that time; it was my first year. And Gail [Green-Anderson] was invited to edit the journal. Such a long story, but those are the bones of the past—or maybe roots is a better image!

Anyway, not long after, Bret and I integrated the journal and the Carnegie Seminar—the seminar is now a space for the collaborative development of scholarship around a single theme. Maybe there will be more shifts to come, depending on the theme and the seminar participants. We’ve already initiated the next issue; the 2017 inquiry is around incarceration, an idea indebted to last year’s Prison to College committee chaired by [former Associate Dean of the Division of Adult and Continuing Education] Jane MacKillop. The researchers are a really great group from Social Science, English, and also from the Grants Office and ACE’s Fatherhood Academy. So exciting! Jen Wynn is a new co-facilitator; she’s got high spirits and she’s just the best listener. She’s a former journalist, a professor of criminal justice and a mitigation specialist, and, like many in the seminar, she’s deeply involved in prison reform. Her knowledge will create more change. And Eric [Hofmann], our new Center director, was a colleague of Randy Bass at Georgetown’s Visible Knowledge Project. Along with Randy, Bret was a co-director of VKP, which was the genesis for both the journal and the Carnegie Seminar. Bret brought those ideas to the Center. And I expect that Eric will bring his experience to the next issue.

We’ve changed, yes, and, at the same time, we’ve circled back to the roots of *In Transit*. The one thing that hasn’t changed is the production team: it’s just five of us from the college, plus Ethan [Ries], our design collaborator—he’s been with us from the beginning, thank goodness. Who else would take calls at midnight about a request to move a title flush-left?

**Patricia:** I wasn’t there at the start, but I’ve been connected to the Carnegie and the journal for several years. I participated in the 2008–9 seminar, in which I created a course portfolio about my public speaking class. Then, Michele invited Marina [Dedlovskaya] and me to write for the fourth volume of *In Transit*, the issue on reflection. So we joined the Carnegie Seminar together, and we wrote an article about students in our critical thinking and Math 095 learning community. Phil [Gimber] was our mentor! I was then invited to become a co-facilitator in 2011; and I was the associate editor of the Fall 2014 issue, which focused on STEM disciplines. This year’s volume is devoted to the First Year Seminar. In addition to the research articles, we’ve included conversations with the Student Success Mentors and with students in the Natural Sciences FYS, and we’ve also got faculty and staff memories of their first year in college. We wanted to present a full picture of the FYS.
Ros: Provost Arcario does a great job of introducing the research articles. Let’s talk for a minute about those other sections. In November, there was a lot of running around with recorders, and my fingers are still a bit tired from typing up the transcripts! Can you say more about those parts? Michele—I know the creative spark for these came from you. Why are they needed? What do these sections add to the journal?

Jose: Before Michele explains, I’d just like to say that the faculty and staff memories and the conversations with students, which are eye-opening, bring another kind of life to the journal. The interviews let you hear students talking about what it really means to be a student, how difficult it is. When I’m teaching, this is something I don’t ordinarily hear; my reading students don’t say these things to me. I mean, as educators, we can leave the classroom assuming that we’ve done something. But we miss a lot, too.

Michele: In a way, research is kind of fixed, isn’t it? I mean, of course, it’s meant to open up new questions, invite new arguments, yet it’s also governed by the constraints of disciplinary and methodological conventions. The conversations with students weren’t governed by anything except our questions, which, in turn, were influenced by the mentors’ presence and responses. For example, Estefany’s offhand remark about the mentors’ connection to the Grad Center Futures Initiative surprised me and led us to more questions and more time together.

Anyway, about the memories—their inclusion was a kind of middle-of-the-night, “Oh, shoot” moment. You remember that initially the memories were supposed to be about experiences of reading, but they didn’t quite fit? Instead of asking for memories about experiences of reading, we should have been asking for memories about experiences of the first year of college. Not only did we do that, but we did it in their native languages, which was just the best. Bengali! Arabic! Kurdish! Anyway, as we got into the nitty-gritty of shaping the journal, a counterpoint or juxtaposition between the fixed research and these more open reflections and memories emerged. The conversations kind of comment on the research; students aren’t just objects of our teaching and research. They are subjects, too, they have their own subjectivity. We wanted the journal to set up that dialogue, the back and forth of teaching and learning. Back to those memories—they were just so much fun! Everyone we asked to interview was right on it: “Yes!” They were so happy to show up and just talk. Like Allia, “Nobody ever asked me this,” she said. “Nobody ever asked.”

As it turned out, the memories offer history lessons. I hope our students read these. Lots of work, though—all that transcribing. It’s a good thing your
fingers aren’t in splints, Ros. And hats off to our interviewers-in-their home-languages. There was so much love in that labor. Just think about Hulya [Kartal-Kanık]: to me, her interview is especially meaningful. I lived in Istanbul during those years; everything she says is just so right on—about women, minorities, education; I know that campus. But the really crazy thing is that she was interviewed by Handan [Ozbilgin] in Turkish, and then Hulya translated her own words into Kurdish. I’m proud that her language—officially banned in private and public life for years by the Turkish government—is in print in our journal. That’s very moving. So, there’s lots of sub-text in this issue. The Turkish-Kurdish language tension is just one example.

Jose: Experiencing the editorial process from the inside, I thought I would have a better sense of the development of the journal. And yet I had not expected or anticipated how inclusive the creation of the journal could be, how many people would become involved and contribute, how much more communal the journal has become and how deeply creative it is.

Patricia: Right—and this time the journal is even more inclusive with more members of our community: ACE, Student Affairs, Public Safety. Look at the list of contributors, at everyone who helped as presentation respondents, peer reviewers, interviewers, translators, and our technical support team. That’s over sixty people! We hope this volume will touch many people on campus. There’s something for everybody to read—interviews, research articles, and student testimonies.

Michele: Yes, this work is our contribution to alignment! You know, every time we’re on a committee, you get a glimpse of the life and work of your colleagues, and you think, “Oh, that would be a great article! Let’s get that down!” So, the journal is meant to represent campus life—it’s a fragment of what we’re thinking about at a particular time. It’s always got a focus—this year the FYS, next year incarceration, and the year after that, maybe the meaning of the humanities. But all of this is just a detail of a mural, really. By the way, we should mention that Jayashree’s [Kamblé] closing piece is a fragment of that original idea to write about reading. But that didn’t work out … apologies to those who tried to help us. We haven’t given up! How we read now is one of the big questions.

Ros: I have seen firsthand the amount of work required for the Carnegie Seminar participants, the facilitators, and the editors. What makes the experience worth all that time and effort?
Michele: One of our Carnegie objectives is to introduce faculty to SoTL in their fields. That’s just one of our tasks: to bring their disciplinary interests into alignment with teaching and learning scholarship in their disciplines. We sometimes struggle to achieve equilibrium between these practices. In other words, you can know everything about *Middlemarch*—but how effectively can you teach what you know?

Patricia: And what you don’t know very well—many of us had to learn how to teach the First Year Seminar. As Andrea says in her Author’s Reflection, the Carnegie Seminar gave her the space and time to think about her experience teaching the FYS, “to put pen to paper.” In just over one year, the participants produce an article for *In Transit*, but the journal is only the first step. We encourage the writers to revise for external submission—which, as Michele’s conversation with Peter suggests, may help them with tenure and promotion. For many authors, their *In Transit* article was a first attempt at pedagogical research. When they submit to *In Transit*, the writers know that the pieces need more work—some want to revise the research question; others want to modify their experiment; they all want to collect and analyze more data.

Michele: Right, I imagine that all writers see places for improvement. In Carnegie, we kind of structure the gaps; and, as you say, the writers identify the parts to be revised for external review. But we also know that readers read with an expectation that the piece they are reading is finished. So, even if we say it’s a work-in-progress, the text must be coherent, make an argument, and show purpose and respect for scholarly conventions. To prepare for external publication, maybe they’ll join Nancy’s [Berke] Faculty Scholars Publication Workshop. We always suggested this continuity of commitment.

Patricia: I remember that after our *In Transit* article was published, Marina and I added a semester of data and strengthened our lit review. The only revision suggested by the SENCER Journal peer reviewers was the addition of a few sentences to the conclusion. Because the seminar and editors supported our writing, the process of external submission was really smooth.

Michele: Even with the support—or editorial nagging—a year flies by. From seed to fully flourishing plant in a year—when you’re also teaching so many hours, when you’re in a seminar that meets only four hours a month, and you’re being asked to come up with an idea, stage the idea, and implement it, and then analyze the results, and then go through this horrendous revision process in which everyone is on you at every step of the way—I know that’s really difficult, really hard. The Carnegie Seminar’s expectations must be high.
because we’re going public; we’re putting our writers out there, before colleagues and critics. With that visibility comes vulnerability. Preparing writers for the risks of visibility and vulnerability—that’s our responsibility as editors and facilitators. Along with Louise [Fluk], we check every word, all the data, organization, everything. Not all writers love that scrutiny, of course—but better than embarrassment or dismissal. Nothing gets by Louise; if only she’d fact-checked all that fake news.

**Patricia:** Definitely! And during the seminar, as facilitators, we try to create an environment for the writers to thrive. But I don’t think being invited to facilitate a seminar makes you a facilitator. The Carnegie Seminar is also about professional development. I teach communication, and I still had so much to learn about facilitating. I tend to react a little too fast; I had to become more patient, and make sure everybody’s voice was heard. The community agreements read at the beginning of each session were useful, too—I learned to replace “but” with “and.” I also valued the seriousness of our seminar preparation. And, I liked having our planning meetings over coffee in our piazza, the E-Atrium. That was a perfect place to work and say good morning to everyone as they walked by.

**Jose:** 2015–16 was my first year as a Carnegie co-facilitator. I soon realized that facilitating and working with writers was a very complicated and complex task. I kind of stepped back a little, and I observed Michele’s affection for everyone—my inclination is not necessarily to do that, but “the display of public affection” kind of affected me. I observed, and I think I learned a great deal about how to listen more carefully, and how to be more constructive in my observations and comments, and how to aim for balance between the theoretical and the pragmatic. But I sometimes felt like someone learning to jump rope, ready to get in, but wary of tripping.

**Michele:** Yes, well, I have to be wary of calling everyone “sweetheart.” It was okay in my neighborhood, but maybe not in a seminar!

**Patricia:** Jose, this was your first time, so it will get easier. Having been a co-facilitator since 2011, I now practice in the Senate what I learned in the seminar. Look, we both participated in the Carnegie Seminar, we both wrote an article, and we both became facilitators. We have been given the opportunity to grow as professionals and to give back in different capacities. And it’s not just the two of us, many former participants or facilitators remain connected. They come back as mentors and peer reviewers. We try to maintain contact from one seminar year to the next. Former colleagues serve as respondents
during presentations of the research, for example, Evelyn [Burg] and Kathy [Karsten]. This year we were lucky to have Daryl [Davis]; his knowledge about research methods really helped all of us.

**Ros:** Let’s talk more about the writing process—what’s hard or fun? What do the writers get from the process? And what have you learned?

**Patricia:** The participants came from different disciplines and had to learn about SoTL. If you read the Author’s Reflections at the end of the articles, the challenges are clear. Many felt that SoTL methodology was so unlike their own research conventions in math or science. For a long time, I didn’t really know what they meant because I thought that research was research, regardless of the discipline. I talked with the writers in my cohort about the differences they perceived, and I tried to understand their point of view. Then, I finally realized that their main problem was a lack of familiarity with SoTL in their area of inquiry. Positioning themselves and their project within an existing body of knowledge was challenging and unsettling.

**Jose:** Not only that, but sometimes, when presenting to the group, participants would articulate ideas more clearly than what you sometimes would see in their drafts; the transformation from speech to prose required extra effort, which makes sense because writing is more demanding. This went back and forth. They’d say one brilliant and interesting thing, then later, in the writing, what came out was so different—a whole other line of inquiry.

**Michele:** But don’t you think that’s what happens with writing? You can say something, but when you sit down to write—that’s a very different process. And, you know, when I talked to our Carnegians about writing every day? They looked at me with horror, like, “Oh my God!” I had these really laughably high expectations—write four hours a day. And they looked at me like I was nuts, so I lowered it. “Okay, write two hours;” “Okay, write one hour; oh, all right, write forty-five minutes.” “Hey, can you give fifteen minutes a day?” And they said they just couldn’t write. Oh! I fantasized about the MacDowell Colony—the artist residency. You stay in your little cottage all day and write. Lunch is delivered to your little door in a basket. Years ago, I heard about Japanese editors locking writers in motel rooms until the work was done. I don’t know if lunch was served. Maybe I’m mixing that up with a horror movie—which is maybe what writing is at times.

**Jose:** It’s very hard for faculty who are teaching a full load to actually think of themselves as scholars and do the sort of research they need to do with all of that other work.
Michele: We have so many obligations. Faculty in the seminar have every intention of writing. What would you do? Before you is this requirement to learn something that’s unfamiliar, totally new, like pedagogical research, and at the same time, you’ve got these other, more familiar obligations. Well, of course, you’re going to the other obligations. You’ll leave the writing aside. On the other hand, our writers stayed true to the task: despite everything, they came through, with integrity, and we are grateful for every word. I’m not sure if they’re still talking to us, though. [Laughter]

Patricia: Yes, the writing process is demanding but it’s rewarding, too! As Milena [Cuéllar] said, the seminar gave her confidence that she could write a SoTL article while keeping up with other obligations. That’s what happened to me, too. I’ve learned so much about writing and editing. I know that if I have to write, I agonize less. I used to say, “I can’t write this thing.” Now I just go and I write, and the next day, I make sure it makes sense. I just feel more comfortable.

Michele: You’re using your words. [Laughter]

Jose: I’ve learned a lot, I’m beginning to think in a different way. I’ve learned about scholarship and writing, about the constant search for more information, and I’ve learned when to stop looking for more. I also became more aware of how painful it can be to revise when you thought you were finished. Seeing the participants go through that made me more mindful, more alert, more empathetic, an awareness that I bring into my classroom.

Michele: And you’ve resumed graduate work on your doctorate.

Jose: Yes, I’m trying to embrace that reality more fully.

Michele: We can publish one of your chapters in In Transit. In the meantime, let’s celebrate our writers, our contributors, and our anniversary!

[Laughter]