

# 100 Thousand Billion Bryn Mawrs

Exploring the *range of what's possible* for a Bryn Mawr curriculum

So far, President Cadge's Current Topics in Higher Education series has asked:

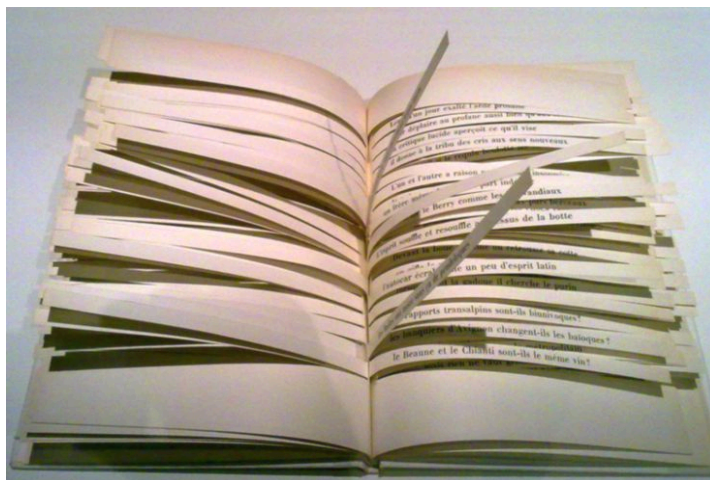
- "What is the purpose of higher education?"
- "Who pays the bills?"
- "What is the role of shared governance?"
- "What does the liberal arts college of the future look like?"
- "What is the role of public scholarship?"

In this next part of the series, we ask: "How can we imagine the range of what's possible in a Bryn Mawr curriculum?" For this, we'll be running an interactive workshop that generates 100 thousand billion (100 trillion) possible Bryn Mawr curricula in about 60 minutes.

The goal of this workshop is **not** to redesign Bryn Mawr's curriculum. It's **not** to identify "the best" Bryn Mawr curriculum – nor even to identify problems in our current curriculum. The goal is to generate novel ideas – to shake up our thinking – through the use of creative constraints.

"Creative constraint" is a method championed by the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* (the "workshop of potential literature," stylized *Oulipo*). This cross-disciplinary collaboration between writers and mathematicians uses constraints to generate new ideas and structures.

Our workshop is riffing off a 1961 work by Ouplio-founder Raymond Queneau: 10 sonnets, each with 14 lines (photo at right). Each line is printed on a strip of paper, which can be flipped independently of the rest of the poem. Because each line fits with each poem, the lines can be combined in  $10^{14}$  different ways, creating 100 thousand billion (100 trillion) different possible poems. It's called [100 Thousand Billion Poems](#).



In this workshop, Bryn Mawr faculty, staff, and students will assemble a similar project: "100 Thousand Billion Bryn Mawrs."

There will be 14 tables in the Great Hall. Each table will have one element of a Bryn Mawr education. Are these the *only* elements of a Bryn Mawr education? No, of course not! They're creative constraints.

Each table will brainstorm as many ways as they can imagine that Bryn Mawr could execute that element of its curriculum (for example: how could we structure the first-year seminar? How could we structure the language requirement?). From those, each table will choose their 10 favorites. They will upload these to an online form, which will feed into an online website.

Each time the web page is refreshed, it will select one random option from each of the 14 categories, generating a new possible Bryn Mawr curriculum. There are 14 categories, with 10 possibilities each, yielding  $10^{14}$  unique Bryn Mawr educations: 100 thousand billion Bryn Mawrs.

After the groups have submitted their ideas, we'll have some structured reflections. For those able to stay after 1pm, we'll also have an informal conversation with [Bryn Mawr Artist-in-Residence Ellie Ga](#), who will be there observing and reflecting on our process and products.

What will come of this?

- We'll make *100 Thousand Billion Bryn Mawrs* into a single book, to live in Special Collections along with Queneau's work – a snapshot of our collective thinking at this moment.
- At each table, a designated recorder will be taking notes on the conversation – not just the final 10 ideas submitted to the form, but also ideas that come up in the conversation. These will be compiled into a document to be shared with the faculty doing our next curricular review.
- Mostly, though, this is a communal exercise in intellectual play – a chance for us all to look at the curriculum as if we were (as Queneau put it) “rats who construct the labyrinth from which they plan to escape.”

Thanks (so far!) to:

- **Hadiyah Al-Gahdari** (BMC '26) and **Shannon Kearns** in the President's Office for coordinating info about our peer institutions that we'll use in the workshop.
- Our wonderful LITS team designing the website for this workshop: **Emma Dermansky** (BMC '27 and LITS Digital Scholarship Project Assistant), **Alice McGrath** (Interim Director of Educational & Scholarly Technology), and **Alyssa Piviorotto** (Data Science Instructional Support Coordinator and Lecturer).
- **Janelle Rebel** (Director of Special Collections) for ordering and coordinating copies of Queneau's book for this workshop.
- **Carrie Robbins** (Curator of Art & Artifacts) for organizing Ellie Ga's residency so she can participate in the workshop.
- **Rachel Kunz** (President's Office) for organizing the workshop.