The Practice of Reading Good Books: A Plea to Teachers and Students

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The Practice of Reading Good Books: A Plea to Teachers and Students

Corey Anton, Assistant Professor in the School of Communications, has published in a number of scholarly journals including: Semiotica, Communication Theory, Human Studies, and Philosophy and Rhetoric and is the author of Selfhood and Authenticity, (New York: SUNY Press, 2001).

“What I mean by reading is not skimming, not being able to say as the world saith, ‘Oh yes, I’ve read that!’ but reading again and again, in all sorts of moods, with an increase of delight every time, till the thing read has become a part of your system and goes forth along with you to meet any new experience you may have.” (C. E. Montague)

On Reading Atrophy

Mark Twain, in characteristic wit, once wrote, “the man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who cannot read them.” What practical insight. And who can deny that today’s college students have easy access to good books. But we should not draw the quick conclusion that today’s students take advantage by reading more good books than ever. On the contrary, increasing numbers of students do not read good books, and, perhaps just as many, at least by their own estimates, cannot read them. The overall point is that the covers of countless good books stand as doors neglected and unopened, their enclosed worlds perhaps forever forgotten. The consequences of such negligence may be impossible to anticipate fully, but for now, we can identify conditions which, directly or indirectly, feed the general state of reading atrophy.

Obviously, reading is not disappearing wholesale. In fact, there appears to be as much reading as ever before. Publishing still runs high (including magazines, newspapers, tabloids, memos and mailings and on television screen. Reading remains, as before, on the rise, so what is the atrophy and loss of a

Consider times we called “easy reading” or “serious study.” Readers encounter unfamiliar words and access instant information—whether by the semi-literate—is the can be set in contrast with “reading” or “serious study.” Difficult reading, must obtained only gradually, is misinformed about the (or are simply unwilling they may assume that reading. Difficult reading is consumable, is thereby, thus, many good books.

A little experimentation how comfortably they readings not discussed in uncomfortable, and much of their content textbooks. Now, ask good notes were taken, still could earn a “B” reading. How many will fair number of courses reveal that some inst do not rely upon student pick-up on this and use occasional, haven’t we do the assigned reading understand. Knowing use that explanation, cursory glancing at th
Decision of Good Reading and Writing

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E. Montague)

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and on television screens, computer texts, and e-mail.
Reading remains, and some sorts of reading are even
on the rise, so what is the big deal? The big deal is
the atrophy and loss of a particular kind of reading.

Consider times when we engage in what could be
called "easy reading" or simply "looking at information."
Such activities are characterized by quick glances over
familiar words and syntax. Easy reading means we
access instant information, and immediate consum-
ability—whether by the consummate reader or the
semi-literate—is the measure of message clarity. This
can be set in contrast with what might be called "difficult
reading" or "serious study." Difficult reading takes time.
Readers encounter unknown words, familiar words used
in unfamiliar ways, as well as long and complex syntacti-
structural. "Information," if this is delivered over in
difficult reading, must be ruminated upon and hence is
obtained only gradually. Because students can be deeply
misinformed about the demands of difficult reading
(or are simply unwilling to make the needed effort),
they may assume that all reading should be easy read-
ing. Difficult reading, scorned for not being instantly
consumable, is thereby defined out of the picture, and
thus, many good books are avoided altogether.

A little experiment might help here: ask colleagues
how comfortably they test students over assigned read-
ings not discussed in class. Most, I suspect, feel a little
uncomfortable, and many who are comfortable gain
much of their comfort by assigning "user-friendly"
textbooks. Now, ask students how many courses, if
good notes were taken during each class session, they
pick-up on this and use it to their disadvantage. If only
occasionally, haven't we all heard students say they didn't
read assigned readings because it was too difficult to
understand. Knowing ahead of time that they later can
use their explanation, some students may do just enough
cursory glancing at the reading to be able to demon-
strate their confusion over it. The underlying logic here
is that it is more socially acceptable to
be incompetent than to be lazy. There
is more social utility in saying that one
is unable to read than in saying that
one did not, genuinely, try to read it.
What could explain this? If students
have bought into psychological
notions of "mind," or "intelligence,"
or "intellectual capacities," they may
believe that intelligence cannot be
cultivated in the same way that indus-
triousness can. Society holds people
responsible for sloth and indolence,
but ignorance and intellectual incom-
petence are relieved of moral weight
because these are taken to be genetic
or somehow beyond an individual's
ability—whether by the consummate reader or the
semi-literate—is the measure of message clarity. This
is not reducible to a psychological
uncomfortable, and many who are comfortable gain
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reading's progeny live. In
where reading's progeny live. In
They should not demand immediate
practice this means students should
read assigned readings, participate in
class discussion, and then read again.
They should not demand immediate
comprehension for themselves nor
immediate comprehensibility of the readings. On the contrary, they must learn to suspend their desire for immediate grasp and to read on anyway. Then, after a second or third reading and after having discussed the reading with others who also have read (and maybe after reading some other relevant texts), they can expect to be ready to begin.

Of the countless good books which could be said to be too difficult to read, consider this question. Imagine students are offered $1,000 if they can correctly answer 7 out of 10 questions about the reading. Under such conditions how many now could read a little better than before? Granted, concert pianists are not made overnight, and one cannot, even with the largest cash incentives, instantly become a great reader. Still, great readers must be willing to practice, and practice requires effort and patience. But if, as Lee Thayer suggests, "Most people prefer problems they 'just can't solve' to solutions that they 'just don't like,'" then an adequate corrective isn't likely to be forthcoming any time soon.

Many if not all students could practice their reading more thoroughly. And, many if not all also could read before as well as after class discussion. But too many, maybe even most, seem to think that such rigorous reading and re-reading is not worth the effort.

**Not Worth the Effort**

The common-sense notion of "not being worth the effort" gets at the very heart of the growing state of reading atrophy. For starters, difficult reading may seem not worth the effort when compared to the little effort required by other communicative media. The average college student has continuous instantaneous access to pre-packaged and readily grasped information through television, radio, and the Internet. The ease and availability of these other media directly feed reading atrophy. The evidence here is so abundant and overly-apparent, so widely recognized and frequently talked about that we need to safeguard against attending to these factors to the exclusion of others.

"We are so built," Antoine de Saint-Exupéry tells us, "that our appetites are the outcome of the foods we eat." Rather than walk around the library stacks, many students now use search-engines from home computers to access only that information which is available on-line. Any text which is consumable can be absorbed and easily obtained information (a steady diet of mass media few textbooks) means that students have not taken the effort to encounter the idea that a good book never has a reader who might not even start to read. Given that some students consciously ruminate over content, we underestimate their abilities for comprehension. They fail to practice their capacities for expressing beliefs.

Beliefs cannot grow and receive no nourishment or patience. David Shenk writes of the culture where he observes, "there's no such thing as dishonorable effort." That's because "our culture. We now live in the 'no effort' culture where he observes, "there's no such thing as dishonorable effort." That's because "our culture. We now live in the 'no effort' culture where he observes, "there's no such thing as dishonorable effort." That's because "our culture. We now live in the 'no effort' culture where he observes, "there's no such thing as dishonorable effort." That's because "our culture. We now live in the 'no effort"(1999, p. 41). Some teachers are aware of this point. In class, I sometimes ask, "Have you ever listen to a song or a movie or your favorite song? They always look at me so seemingly dumb, like a stupid question? The culture of my students today is such that it seems they have never thought about them again and again. The ability to grasp, however, is that our appetites are the outcome of the foods we eat. Rather than walk around the library stacks, many students now use search-engines from home computers to access only that information which is available on-line. Any text which is consumable can be absorbed and easily obtained information (a steady diet of mass media few textbooks) means that students have not taken the effort to encounter the idea that a good book never has a reader who might not even start to read. Given that some students consciously ruminate over content, we underestimate their abilities for comprehension. They fail to practice their capacities for expressing beliefs.

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of the readings. On the other hand, if you spend their desire for reading, anyway. Then, after a while of having discussed the readings, they can expect to spend their desire for reading (and maybe after talking), they can expect to spend their desire for reading.

which could be said to answer this question. Imagine someone can correctly answer this question. Imagine someone can correctly answer this question. Imagine someone can correctly answer this question. Imagine someone can correctly answer this question. Imagine someone can correctly answer this question. Imagine someone can correctly answer this question. Imagine someone can correctly answer this question. Imagine someone can correctly answer this question. Imagine someone can correctly answer this question. Imagine someone can correctly answer this question. Imagine someone can correctly answer this question. Imagine someone can correctly answer this question. Imagine someone can correctly answer this question. Imagine someone can correctly answer this question. Imagine someone can correctly answer this question. Imagine someone can correctly answer this question. Imagine someone can correctly answer this question. Imagine someone can correctly answer this question. 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The marks of reading atrophy also appear when students read aloud in class. More than nervously rushing through, many speed along so as to have it read, to get the point said. Their hurried pace reflects a kind of scanning for information. It is obvious that they don't think of a text as a place to dwell or as a shaping stone against which to forge themselves. Most students, perhaps most people in the society at large, impatiently take information to be a thing, some kind of stuff delivered over or added to their "knowledge base." They think of reading only as a means to an end of information and not as an end in itself. Perhaps they assume their minds are like computers and that information is a kind of substance which is transmitted from one person to another by way of language. They may think of ideas as transportable objects and language as a kind of "conduit" for the social distribution of personal ideas (Lakoff and Johnson). Rather than understanding themselves as creatures able to grow in abilities for expression and comprehension, they stop short and merely seek information.

Impatience also provides common sense with the notion of an "average reader." Employing such a notion for comparison, students quickly and easily take a self-defeating position. They say, "I read slower than other people. Reading is hard for me." Whether any given person is or is not a "slow" reader is not the point. What is more interesting is the high number of people who make this claim. Going only by students' self-expressions we could conclude, logic notwithstanding, that slow reading is an intellectual deficit, or at the least, not how one is supposed to read. Shouldn't we, by practical contrast, congratulate and commend those persons who have developed the competence to be slow readers?

But not all students hurry through their readings. Some can sense their unreadiness to begin yet don't understand that no one begins ready, and so, they fail to begin at all. They think they don't have to do the readings. Many will pass tests and courses—and some may do well without reading—from which students may infer that this demonstrates their ability. Some students may even make a misguided attempt to prove to themselves that they are. In his essay A History of ober, Thayer addresses the subject of intelligibility to these and why people may say, 'I don't want to be a reader'... It is no less demanding than any other is just less romantic" (1994). Individualism is the root of the problem about reading (and perhaps reading is an end in itself). Perhaps everyone has their own idea of what is right, or in the case, the logic goes, not right. The correct interpretation is just as valid as any other. Reading is saturated by this romantically wittingly or not concluded effort.

Romantic (psychologist) demonstrated also by the high number of people to have their own thoughts. They may notice that they've taken ideas from other people. However, in a class discussion I suggested the notion of an average reader. I asked the students to respond to student questions: Nietzsche, William James, McLuhan. In response, students said, "What do you think? I want to know what someone else thinks. That is what I think; these are my thoughts now." My response was an illustration: Dylan Thomas, the "late" Wittgenstein grew to discover. He challenged his earlier views of the "late" Wittgenstein's inability to grasp them. They make...
may infer that this demonstrates their intelligence. Some students may even skip readings altogether in a misguided attempt to produce evidence of how "smart" they are. In his essay A Poetic For Communication, Lee Thayer addresses the subtle individualism which lends intelligibility to these actions. He writes, "And that's why people may say, 'I want to be a writer,' but not, 'I want to be a reader'... Learning how to 'be' a reader is no less demanding than learning how to 'be' a writer; it is just less romantic" (1997, p. 79). The romantic faith in individualism is the root of many students' assumptions about reading (and perhaps of just about everything) that "everyone has their own interpretation." If this is the case, the logic goes, then there is no way to secure the correct interpretation. Any interpretation of the text is just as valid as any other. Because common sense is saturated by this romantic individualism, many students wittingly or not conclude that careful study is not worth the effort.

Romantic (psychological) individualism is demonstrated also by the high number of students who claim to have their own thoughts, even though they fail to notice that they've taken that notion and expression from other people. Here is further evidence: During class discussion I sometimes include quotations in response to student questions, for example a line from Nietzsche, William James, Kenneth Burke, or maybe McLuhan. In response to such citations, on more than one occasion, students have said, "O.K. Fine. But what do you think? I want to know what your opinion is, not what someone else thinks." I can't help but say, "This is what I think; these guys aren't thinking anything. They're dead, have been for some time! These are my thoughts now." My response can be explained further with an illustration: During his long scholarly career, Wittgenstein grew to disagree with his own earlier position and later offered a corrective, one which radically challenged his earlier writings. Now, if some persons only have read and still adhere to the earlier writings, whose position would they be holding? Certainly not the "late"Wittgenstein's. Additionally, student criticisms such as those just mentioned make it seem as if people aren't required to earn ideas and as if they aren't challenged to become who they need to become in order to grasp them. They make it seem as if ideas are found in
books the way food is found in refrigerators. This also shows how common sense wants it both ways. On the one hand, people claim that books can be too difficult to read. On the other hand, they imply that ideas are taken from books easily, as if ideas simply lay about waiting to be adopted by less-than-original thinkers.

Rather than wanting to have their own thoughts, readers ought to actively celebrate and cultivate their openness to history and to others. They thus would become willing interlocutors with the many brilliant minds who have come before them. My colleague Robert Mayberry puts it this way, “Students must learn to ask more than, ‘Can I get others to understand what I mean by my words?’ They more fundamentally should ask, ‘Can I learn to understand what others mean by their words?’”

A final contributor to reading atrophy may be much larger than those so far addressed. Reading good books may seem to be less than worth the effort because we fail to imagine noble or grand purposes for learning. Without such purposes we falter, or as Thayer was wont to say to his students, “What we know is always constrained and enabled by our purposes for knowing.”

A practical implication is that if we sense that what we talk about has little worth outside the classroom (if we cannot imagine other reasons for knowing it) little effort may seem justified in learning it. But if we believe that what we talk about bears upon what we need to know for life (if we can imagine grand purposes for knowing something), then much expended effort can seem justified and appropriate. Indeed, if course material is believed to be vital to students’ futures, to their very humanity, then teachers may feel justified in requiring a great deal of effort from students. But if teachers believe that what is to be learned is of only moderate value (e.g. in course content or even in subject matter), they may feel guilt about having students work too hard on it. Some systematic avoidance of reading good books, on the part of both students and teachers, may be a kind of admission that, given the goals and purposes of some courses, only minimal effort is justified.

Why Read Good Books?
So why should we want to read good books? What makes reading good books worth the effort? If, as Twain suggests, “the man who has no advantage over the man who has not, then what is the advantage of any number of the former over the latter?”

Maybe Twain means that reading frequently requires learning not only of such reading, then, it is a skill that we at least can. Furthermore, this probably offers more advantages than it is that facts to be recalled later “are facts come to be known.” From the Latin “factum,” though they are the “how” we know, are not the “what” we know, are not the “how” we speak we do not consider are “words are “focally absent,” only their power to separate the world (cf. Burke). Still, words used in the same; they lack meaning another. This is why analogously difficult to recall. Reading books, therefore, is that with our growing lexicon.

A second advantage of the very effort difficult. Unfortunately, message clarity feeds students reading is a product of “speech were easier,” students see the problem of reading. Here, identifies the larger is not a symptom. In the name of progress, and statistical resea...
suggestions, “the man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who cannot read them,” then what is the advantage? Obviously, he could have meant any number of things.

Maybe Twain meant that reading good books frequently requires learning new words. One advantage of such reading, then, is that our vocabulary grows, or at least it can. Furthermore, learning new words arguably offers more advantages than merely learning new information. Words learned are not normally learned as facts to be recalled later. Words, qua words, are the way facts come to be known. The word “fact,” in fact, comes from the Latin “factum,” meaning, “to make.” Words, though they are the “how” of how we are able to know what we know, are not normally known facts. When we speak we do not consciously attend to our words. The words are “focally absent” (cf. Leder) as we experience only their power to separate and merge aspects of the world (cf. Burke). Still, isn't it interesting that when you learn a new word, you can hear it when it's used around you? Isn't it also interesting that we do not experience the opposite case? We don't hear all of the different unknown words used around us. All unknown words are the same; they lack meaningful differentiation from one another. This is why any particular one can be exceedingly difficult to recall. One advantage of reading good books, therefore, is that our sense of the world grows with our growing lexicons.

A second advantage comes, ironically enough, from the very effort difficult reading can and does require. Unfortunately, contemporary pedagogical focus on message clarity feeds students' assumptions that all difficult reading is a product of bad writing. “If only the writings were easier,” students seem to think, “then we could solve the problem of reading.” Jacques Barzun, in his Begin Here, identifies the larger trend of which this complaint is but a symptom:

In the name of progress and method, innovation, and statistical research, educationalists have persuaded the world that teaching [reading?] is a set of complex problems to be solved. It is no such thing. It is a series of difficulties. They recur endlessly and have to be met; there is no solution—which means also that there is no mystery (1992, p. 5).
Many good books, therefore, offer natural resistances, not problems that could have been solved by simpler writing. And more to the practical point: what are we to do with the countless good books that already have been written, many of which, perhaps most, are not models of message clarity? We should recognize this as one of their strengths. They gain part of their value because they can be so difficult, because they require patience and devotion. Is it even possible for TV to provide such difficulties? When have you heard someone on TV use a word you didn’t know? Television, as Neil Postman observes, mainly panders to viewers and tries to keep them amused. On the whole, TV provides pleasurable leisure rather than laborious recreation and so it robs viewers of the struggle to make meaning. In his book, *The Mature Society*, the Nobel Laureate Dennis Gabor addresses how value is conferred through effort:

...I fall back on a simple homely psychology, based on two observations which most people will be able to check from their own experience, or from their own insight.

I. Humans are wonderful in adversity, weak in comfort, affluence and security.

II. Humans do not appreciate what they get without an effort.

The first of these gives us a warning of the dangers, the second gives us a hint how we may perhaps be able to avoid them. (1972, p. 47).

Although students may sense the amount of effort some good books demand and also may realize the arduous struggle of becoming great readers, their quick conclusion that such labors are not worth the effort fails to recognize how effort can be a vital source of worth. In sum, an asset of many good books is that they naturally provide, as Jean Paul Sartre would say, “co-efficients of adversity.” Their difficulties provide for us; they are winds or even sails.

A third advantage of reading good books is that as we work our way through them we learn how to move within particular *styles* of thought. Our own thought is thereby trained to unfold according to certain thinking styles, particular semantic choices and syntactical maneuvers. Learning how to move according to a given text’s style of thought—contour—is not only very difficult, but also why we do. In other words, we do not write books not merely, nor exclusively. Perhaps the cultivation of good books is underappreciated in our reading diets consisting of advertisements, textbooks, Internet information. Yet there is the actual and implied place of a dialogue and kind of thing: “information” book crafted by a master. The author’s style holds a place in the book’s dialogic character, in contrast, students can practice of comprehending even reduce it to mechanics. But Heinz von Foerster may store books but it might as well speak of a system for transporting vehicle (for transport) confused with the thing it is. Someone has to do it. Someone has to do it. (p. 19). The more educated and neglects the growth direction of human aims, reading will be recognized communication medium.

In the first volume of *Kierkegaard lists the first includes detailed discussion and the distinction of knowledge* and the-direction. Communication of can is done indirectly and. Although we can try students,” he argues, we must work on of them” (cf. pp. 269-270). begin practicing rightness. He writes:
ffer natural resistances, have been solved by simpler means. The point: what are we to do with the things that already have been solved by simpler means, are not models of their value because they require patience or TV to provide such information? And someone on TV, as Neil Postman has noted, provides pleasurable entertainment and so it robs meaning. In his book, Erewhon, the scientist and novelist Dennis Gabor provided this through effort: 

By psychology, based research, most people will be able to experience, or from adversity, weak in that they get with- 

the stimuli of the dangers, which may perhaps be able to 

the amount of effort also may realize the great readers, their good books is that Saul Sartre would say, difficulties provide for 

good books is that as we learn how to move 

Our own thought is directed to certain think- 

ices and syntactical according to a given text's style of thought—its particular intonational contour—is not only why some good books can be so difficult, but also why they offer the advantages they do. In other words, we practice the art of reading good books not merely, nor even primarily, to access information. Perhaps the cultivation of thinking-styles remains underappreciated in contemporary life because many reading diets consist mainly of popular magazines, advertisements, textbooks, and quickly consumable Internet information. While students read such texts, the actual and implied author can fade from view. In place of a dialogue and an interlocutor they find an odd kind of thing: "information." But when they read a good book crafted by a masterful writer, the style itself can make apparent that they are engaged in a dialogue. The author's style holds a signature, an indelible mark of the book's dialogic character. When reading a textbook, in contrast, students can easily forget that reading is a practice of comprehension and expression. They may even reduce it to mechanical "information transfer." But Heinz von Foerster well reminds us that "A library may store books but it cannot store information ... One might as well speak of a garage as a storage and retrieval system for transportation. In both instances a potential vehicle (for transportation or for information) is confused with the thing it does when someone makes it do it. Someone has to do it. It does not do anything" (1980, p. 19). The more education focuses upon information and neglects the growth of human capacities and the direction of human aims, the less likely that difficult reading will be recognized in its advantages over other communication media.

In the first volume of his Journals and Papers, Søren Kierkegaard lists the entry "Communication," which includes detailed discussions of indirect communication and the distinction between the "communication of knowledge" and the "communication of capability." Communication of capability, Kierkegaard suggests, is done indirectly and remains without an "object." Although we can try to "pound knowledge into stu- 

"dents," he argues, we must try to "pound capability out of them" (cf. pp. 269-318). This means that we must begin practicing right away regardless of our unreadiness. He writes:
...genuine communication and instruction is training or upbringing...Confusion arises when the upbringer instead of upbringing teaches as if he were imparting knowledge...the rule is to do it as well as one can at every moment, and then again to do it as well as one can the next moment, and so on further, in order continually to get to know it better and better. If, on the other hand, the upbringing is communicated as knowledge, one never receives an upbringing but is always getting merely something to know...The rule for the communication of capability is: begin immediately to do it. If the learner says: I can't, the teacher answers: Nonsense, do it as well as you can. With that the instruction begins. Its end result is: to be able. But it is not knowledge which is communicated. (1967, pp. 279-284)

In Keirkegaard's account, information conveyed is not as essential as the capability indirectly communicated. As organic systems of expression and comprehension, people grow in their abilities to express and to comprehend. This growth is often more vital than the imagined "thing" called information which is presumably transferred from one mind to another. The practice of reading good books, then, helps people to experience for themselves the meaning of Allen Wheelis's suggestions that, "We have to be someone before we can know anything. And when we have become someone, the something we can know is less than the someone we have become."

The advantages of reading good books are not limited to those that come from activities of reading. Some emerge later, arising from the particular subject matter read. For example, if one person reads what others have read, those common reading experiences may engender or enrich discussion on various issues or topics. Moreover, if people have read books unknown to their interlocutors, they can seem, at least initially, to be the original source of what is said. This is why plagiarism is an ever present possibility and temptation. How much mystification in everyday conversation springs from this source? Where do ideas come from? Perhaps we are deeply misinformed about the natures of both reading and persons. How can a text, a material thing to which
and instruction is how, exactly, can we grow familiar with any given work? Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1973) encourages us to acknowledge how our own thought is indebted to the thought of others and to notice how that indebtedness can remain covered-over. He writes,

I am Stendhal while reading him...Sedimented language is the language the reader brings with him, the stock of accepted relations between signs and familiar significations without which he could never have begun to read...in the end a new signification is secreted. It is the effect through which Stendhal's own language comes to life in the reader's mind, henceforth for the reader's own use. Once I have acquired this language, I can easily delude myself into believing that I could have understood it by myself, because it transformed me and made me capable of understanding it...Here then, I would have to admit that I do not live just my own thought but that, in the exercise of speech, I become the one to whom I am listening (p. 12-13; 118).

It is fascinating that we can understand utterances that we could not spontaneously generate on our own. It also is fascinating that we, in both listening and reading, are able to understand those who speak more articulately than ourselves. Have you ever heard someone speak so eloquently that you surprised yourself by your ability to understand and appreciate what was said? Moreover, have you noticed that what we imagine as "sayable" is shaped and formed by what we have heard and read? William James' writing on habit and imitation is relevant here. He suggests that through imitating those we aspire to be, we come to know ourselves. He writes,

We become conscious of what we ourselves are by imitating others—the consciousness of what the others are precedes—the sense of self grows by the same pattern. The entire accumulated wealth of mankind—languages, arts, institutions, and sciences—is passed on from one generation to another by which Baldwin has called social heredity, each generation simply imitating the last. (1958, p. 49)

A phonetic text is a kind of score, a set of instructions for making sounds. Voice, including pronunciation, intonation, and articulation, is an essential component of reading and of interpretation more generally. Of course, mimetically reproducing the score of a phonetic text does not magically transmit meaning from the author's mind to the readers' (cf. Olson). In this regard, phonetic text can easily generate delusions of understanding as it allows us to accurately pronounce (i.e. to sound out) what we do not understand. Obviously then, the goal is not simply to produce sounds accurately but to carefully interpret what those sounds mean. In practice this means we need others to discuss readings with us.

Our talk with others about readings is an essential part of reading. But this is stated too simply. In his A History of Reading, Alberto Manguel tells of his reading aloud to Borges and how Borges analyzed, extrapolated, and elaborated as he followed along. Manguel's point is that sometimes, perhaps often, we need experienced readers as guides. Like a tall mountain, a good book can be difficult to climb. To scale any one, we may first need to become familiar with it, find likely spots to make purchases on its surface. For a successful climb we may need to be part of a team guided by a seasoned expert climber. Routes leading to impasses can then be headed-off, and, places where the terrain is loose and shaky can be strategically traversed.

Finally, some students may only have encountered books which address them as competent employees or well-functioning social roles. They may yet to have encounter books which explicitly address them in their humanity, as a person. Indeed, good
books provide us with more than “facts” or “the news,” and reading good books entails something more profound than keeping oneself informed. It opens us to what can be thought about and helps us learn how to think. There is a critical difference between learning how to think about what needs thinking about and keeping oneself informed. It opens us to what can be thought about and helps us learn how to think. There is a critical difference between learning how to think about what needs thinking about and keeping oneself informed. The underlying issue, the deep roots one might say, is that U.S. popular culture seems to have bought wholesale into psychological (individualistic) understandings of minds, persons, and texts. Underestimation and underappreciation of reading travels hand in hand with pop-psychological notions of intelligence and information. One of the main advantages of reading good books is that it generates incontrovertible proof, solid unmistakable evidence, of how malleable we are. Thus, resources for empirically demonstrating the shortcomings of psychological individualism are to be found within the practice of reading good books.

Closing Remarks
University mission statements often contain some definition of a “college-education.” This, not surprisingly, often includes the claim that students ideally develop “life-long skills of critical thinking, articulate expression, and independent learning.” In practice, this means that reading good books is key. In many respects the most important thing I learned in college was how to read, that is, how to appreciate reading and book culture more generally. Perhaps reading strikes me as so essential because prior to college I read pretty little and liked books even less. I disliked comic books, read close to no fiction, and on the rare occasions when I looked at non-fiction of general human interest, my encounters were sparse, short, and lonely. I prematurely concluded that books were lame. Had I not taken college courses which required reading good books, and by this I mean NOT MERELY TEXTBOOKS, my opinion, I genuinely believe, never would have changed. If students are required to read good books they might be enticed to become great readers. People’s basic attitudes about books and reading change as a result of what they do and do not read. I believe those who read good books are more likely to continue to read independently. 

“In order for a dialogue to begin,” Mikhail M. Bakhtin suggests, “the first voice must be heard.” A book is an invitation to a dialogue and entailed to meet author/I growing infantilization. The first voice never enters into such an invitation. A book is an invitation to a dialogue and entailed to meet author/I. The first voice never enters into such an invitation. A book

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facts” or “the news,” something more profound. It opens us to something more profound. It opens us to something more profound. It opens us to understanding about and keeping a dialogue, one where we are encouraged to meet authors on their terms. But because of the growing infantilization of the culture, some people may never enter into such a dialogue, for they fail to hear the first voice. Teachers must beware the temptation to meet students “at their level.” Even if it is true, that “each receives according to his capacity,” or even granting that, as Abraham Maslow puts it “… the world can communicate to a person only that which he is worthy, that which he deserves or is “up to”; that to a large extent, he can receive from the world and, give to the world, only that which he himself is” (1967, p. 195) the case remains: to read a great work we may have to labor, we may have to become someone in order to understand. Reading, we must never forget, is a practice. If only we would take as much effort and devotion studying good books as the authors did in crafting and composing them. Then we would realize how enriched we are as we become able to engage in meaningful dialogues with the minds found within and without them. One final advantage worth mentioning is that the more books we labor over, the more we are able to read and also the more easily we, when first encountering an author for the first time, accept that we always begin unready. We learn to accept that our readiness to read emerges only after we already have begun.

Practical counsel for those struggling to become great readers: Try to remember back to when you first learned how to read. When you started you were unable to read, and then, by some action, you learned how. How did that happen?

References

Notes

1. I want to acknowledge the inspiration for this argument. I also must give thanks to especially Valerie Pet and useful suggestions.


3. I don’t know what, exactly, I originally thought to be "good". I concluded that any society becomes overly canonical the reading of "real". One wants to reread Twain’s expression.

4. How many of Twain’s label “unreadable”? Or the Western World which would today’s students.

5. Notice the failure to stated by Robert Ma logical the society is, the less valuable seems safe to say that most theoretical one.

6. José Ortega Y Gasset, between the veneer of sociality. He writes,

Notes

1 I want to acknowledge Lee Thayer and Robert Mayberry for their inspiration and assistance in my writing this essay. I also must give thanks to Barry D. Liss, Bryan Crable, and especially Valerie Peterson for their thoughtful criticism and useful suggestions.


3 I don’t know what, exactly, Twain meant by “good books.” I originally thought that I should offer some examples of what I mean by good books, but, after several attempts, I concluded that any such selection, no matter how extensive, becomes overly canonizing and is hopelessly complicit in too grand of omissions. Perhaps Barzun’s (1992) call for the reading of “real” books, which he defines as “a book one wants to reread” (p. 115) provides enough clarity for Twain’s expression.

4 How many of Twain’s good books would undergraduates label “unreadable”? Or, How many of the 54 Great Books of the Western World which Hutchins and Adler put together would today’s students find readable?

5 Notice the failure to have learned the lesson so eloquently stated by Robert Maynard Hutchins: “The more technological the society is, the more rapidly it will change and the less valuable ad hoc instruction will become. It now seems safe to say that the most practical education is the most theoretical one” (1968, p. 19).

6 José Ortega Y Gasset (1958) also addresses this contrast between the veneer of individualism and the deep fact of sociality. He writes,

> With some shame we recognize that the greater part of the things we say we do not understand very well; and if we ask ourselves why we say them, why we think them, we will observe that we say them only for this reason: that we have heard them said, that other people say them (p. 92).

Could it be that we either consciously select where we get our ideas, or that we, thinking that we are thinking for ourselves, simply take our ideas off the rack, from what anyone has say about things? Try to argue against the following: Any person who has interesting thoughts did not build them from the bottom up. No person who we find intellectually interesting is out howling in the woods. And,
is it at all surprising that those who do think for themselves are those who most often explicitly acknowledge their influences and indebtedness to others? Two scholars meet. Among the earliest questions are: "Who were your major influences? and, Who are you currently reading?"

Well beyond the scope of the present essay, someone might document the wholesale loss of everyday terms in the English language. A vast storehouse for analyzing and understanding the most complex of interpersonal relations, English is slowly becoming more and more filled with "introductory textbookeese." Ask your students to define the words "indignation," or "venerate," or "obsequious." Most cannot. Ask them to define the difference between "envy" and "jealousy." Again, most cannot. Comparatively, ask them to define the words such as, "co-dependent," "introvert," "anal," "type A personality," "stressed," or, "Learning Disabled" almost all students will have some attempted definition.

"Taken from page 2 of the Grand Valley State University Undergraduate and Graduate Catalog."