

Students can't, won't, don't *want* to read.

We can change that.

By Melanie Carter (RHET)

One of my favorite short stories, by Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez, opens with a scene of an enormous drowned man washing up on a beach. After the children play with him and the adults in the village take him in, the story traces the ways they accommodate his presence. Paraphrased, especially in language as common as this, the idea is both absurd and horrifying. And yet the story is beautiful: not least because this man, a being who is no longer alive, *speaks*. Just once. And quietly. With that voice, the already-awed reader is pulled even further into the realm of magical realism, a genre in which supernatural events are completely natural.

That particular narrative may seem an odd way to enter this conversation. But reading, and impossible ideas, have been front and center for me recently. I have been asked to address the issue of reading on campus through AUC's Common Reading initiative. Too, our recent CLT symposium highlighted how many of us are raising questions of who we might be, what AUC might become, if we apply what we've learned during the pandemic in our face-to-face classes.

Maha Bali (2011) raised the question of reading at AUC a decade ago. In her *New Chalk Talk* article, she reminded us that issues of language, time, and purpose all must be considered when selecting and assigning reading to students. The issue is raised regularly, too, in education journals we are all familiar with. Some offer dire statistics. Others offer hope. A mix of both may be found in "The Fall, and Rise, of Reading," a 2019 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article in which writer Steven Johnson suggests the answer to students' resistance to reading is in a comprehensive response, cobbling together online annotation platforms with the strategies many of us already use: summary paragraphs, quizzes, lists of questions to guide students and to assess, later, whether they have found the information we believe is important.

Those strategies are what I've been pondering.

Because as much as we want students to read, our methods seem to be working against us. Students tell us they hate reading. Or most of them do. And quizzing them on it, or asking them to summarize, or giving them a list of questions, the answers to which they will ferret out by looking for key words in the text, may force them to do the assignment, but I am not sure they are inspiring them to dive into the next article, the next book chapter, the next anything longer than a text message or Instagram post.

So, what to do? I wonder if the answer isn't fairly simple...

Teach them to love reading.

I am afraid, at this point, you are rolling your eyes. Or thinking this is too vague. Too far from your own discipline. Too light. Too silly.

But if we do not address the deeper issue of motivation, if we do not address this issue of love, we are going to keep working against ourselves. And working against students, with whom we engage in an almost adversarial relationship when we ask them to read and then imply we don't trust them--either to do it or do it well enough.

If students' own stories tell us anything, it is that many of them have not had the experience of reading as an enjoyable activity. Aside from scrolling social media, "reading" has meant the school-oriented, task-based work we are now scrutinizing. And rarely has it been the *real* work. More often, it has been the landscape to be traversed on the way to the point, which is that quiz, or group project, or essay, or grade.

But what if reading--the act of reading--were the point? Or at least part of the point? What if we brought the landscape more clearly into view?

Could we read a segment together as a class, for instance, pointing out this sentence or that paragraph, and pause, as if we were *in* the words, long enough for students to experience them? To be intrigued by the approach or the research findings or the writer's voice? Would this help students see where they are in relation to ideas unfamiliar to them? Would it help them feel comfortable, so that opening the book or re-entering the article after class felt less like a risk, less like *work*, and instead, like reconnecting with a place they had begun to know?

A former student shared recently that in a class he had no interest in, and presented with an article, and content, that was far from his own experience, the professor led the class through several of the steps above. He marveled at how this made him *want* to read. The bonus? He was more interested in the entire class than he had been before.

These ideas may seem obvious. In fact, I almost hesitate to mention them. Except that in the course of a semester, it can be easy to focus on *getting* students to read rather than on why they might want to. And I believe many of them, when they think about it, want to.

A student who emailed recently is an example. She was a poet, she explained, and wondered whether she should take a poetry writing class. I offered to Zoom with her, and in the course of our conversation, I asked what sorts of poems she liked. There was a pause. And then embarrassment: "I don't actually read poems." I watched as the implication of this dawned on her.

To be fair (and to keep this from veering into the "dire" category), she'd made an effort. She kept a book of 19th Century English verse on her bedside table and would pick it up at random, trying to relate to the language and the ideas. But this, and perhaps Instapoetry, the current phenomenon of poems posted on social media, was really all she knew.

With so little foundation, how could she determine what she liked? Or *whether* she liked it?

We may be thinking that we are not in the business of inspiration, and certainly not in the business of "teaching reading." But most of us spend large parts of our days drawing our students into the fields we

love. Those fields are written about. Conversations among scholars happen in writing. Laypeople are brought into those conversations--about economics, politics, engineering, social and physical infrastructure of all kinds--with books that land on *New York Times* and Amazon "best" lists. They sell by the millions.

To send students into the world feeling as if they will exist, always, outside of those conversations, to send them into the world feeling that they cannot read, or that they cannot read in the way we do, and because of that inadequacy, will refuse to read, and refuse to read the most joyful, meaningful works--works that will stimulate their intellects as well as their hearts--means that in some measure, large or small, we have failed them.

I felt this one morning recently as I stepped out for a walk and with sudden clarity realized that despite my best efforts, I was still missing the point. I had brought in contemplative strategies and had made reading in my classes collaborative rather than individual. But while I may have made texts more accessible, I had not helped students want to read.

I walked back inside, opened the laptop, and typed: *I want to change this.*

I wonder if some of you might want to do this, too. And if so, if you would think with me about how we can do this together.

Perhaps we could begin with a nod to those reading questions, which, re-considered, might sound like this:

Are we readers? Do we have a "culture of reading"? How do our individual lives--as people engaged with the thoughts of others far beyond AUC--manifest on campus? And are there ways we might bring students into those lives? Teach them, along with the immediate content of our courses, how we navigate the texts we choose for them? Help them understand why we want them to read? Why *they* might want to? Help them understand why, even when a text is challenging, we dive in, over and over again, and find ourselves richer for having invested ourselves?

All of this leads me back to the beginning. I won't give away the end of the story, but I will say that the drowned man, or really, the villagers' faith in him, grows to such beautiful proportions that he changes the village.

It is an apt analogy, I think, for where we are now: each of us holding an impossible idea, one that seems too odd, too ill-fitting for what we have been, or too small for where we want to go.

But if there is magic anywhere, perhaps it is in a small idea all of us believe in.

I welcome faculty to an initial forum, "Can We Promote a Love of Reading? (And if so, how?)" during assembly hour on April 21. Click [here to register](#).

References

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