

NEW CHALK TALK

Richard Byford¹ responds to...

“To Read, or Not to Read ... But That’s Not the Question!”

I am writing in response to Maha’s² article in *New Chalk Talk* about the problems we have in persuading students to read. Firstly, I would like to thank Maha very much for a very stimulating and thought-provoking article, and I’ve jotted down a few responses below.

I must admit I was surprised that we need to tread carefully when assigning students readings. It may well be true on the one hand, that students do have some difficulty with some readings, but having said that I’ve always believed that reading was at the heart of a university education; and educators and students should know this which is why they are here. As a result, it’s hardly a debatable issue?

My own feelings about reading are as follows:

Firstly, it is a usual question in Britain to ask a student at university what they are *reading* in order to find out their chosen subject. X could be reading physics at Cambridge, for example. The use of such a verb does suggest that reading is at the heart of a university education.

Secondly, I read English literature for my first degree. I love reading which is why I chose literature. I will admit I am biased towards reading.

Biases aside, I am puzzled as to what courses don’t require a modicum of reading.

I read literature true, which involved reading the primary sources of novels and poetry, and reading secondary sources by academics who were commenting on the primary sources.

I studied history as an ‘A’ level. Not only did this involve looking at the various historical arguments presented in the text books, but we also looked at primary sources and learnt a little about historiography.

I studied economics at ‘A’ level, reading texts written by economists presenting various economical theories.

I have a master’s degree in linguistics, and I was required to read many textbooks and articles about the way language functions.

I’ve studied art history, looking at paintings and sculptures, and reading the texts on what the art historians have said.

I’ve studied classical Arabic and Egyptian hieroglyphs. I read the required grammars and translated the target texts having first read them.

I’ve taught religion. We looked at the primary religious sources, and then what the experts have said in the secondary sources.

My flat mate at university was studying law. Not only did he have to become au fait with the law, but also with the way it was to be interpreted. His text books were huge and expensive.

I could go on. It’s true the above are essentially humanities and social science subjects, but all require a great deal of reading. Perhaps the sciences don’t require any reading?

I think any number of questions can be raised some of which I have listed:

I would like to know what is meant by “reading.” It quite obviously needs to be defined. Does the act of “reading” differ from discipline to discipline? If so, then how.

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What do we read? If nothing else I would suggest tentatively, for a start, we read written text, symbols, including musical and mathematical, and images, if nothing else.

How else do students learn if they don't read? It's true that they may attend lectures and seminars given by professors and instructors, but doesn't the professor or instructor impart knowledge logically and sequentially either using verbal or symbolic language? The professor is still transmitting text, and the student must take note of it.

Doesn't the professor also recommend the seminal works in a given field and direct the student's attention to them? Doesn't the professor attempt to communicate, explicate or explain such texts if they are a little difficult? Some may say that rather than reading, the students use the computer. How though do students gain knowledge from the computer if they don't read it? Our job, where the computer is concerned, is to ensure that students are using the seminal texts that have been to date uploaded. We want them to discriminate between the good texts and the dross.

It must also be said that at least in the literary and language affiliated departments various strategies for critiquing and explicating texts have been developed, and the last half century has seen a profusion of such approaches, so why is "reading" still so problematic?

English is not the native tongue of most of the students so reading is difficult. I admire the students for studying in a foreign language, and it is true that reading can present some difficulties. Yet ditto above, and those who are practitioners in Teaching English as a Second Language for Academic Purposes have developed various strategies for overcoming this. I myself have explored this area.

A good deal of content is culturally specific and not particularly relevant to the Egyptian student. That may well be the case. I've never read Thomas Mann, and probably never will; however, I do realise that he is an important writer; and I think that "global citizens" should be able at least to recognise that there are seminal works produced by all cultures that do have relevance to all humanity. Conversely, if too much knowledge is too "American" or "Western" then there are plenty of students in other countries learning Arabic and Middle Eastern affairs. It's important to learn about other cultures.

British newspapers were seen as problematic for being too culturally specific for the student, yet British journalists are constantly drawing upon the linguistic resources of Shakespeare, Jane Austen and other great works which are taught in ECLT. Many of us enjoy studying foreign language and literature, be it French, Russian, Arabic, Russian, Latin, Japanese, etc., precisely because we enjoy attempting to learn the nuances of another language. We are also constantly using the semantic and syntactic resources of other languages to enrich or diversify our own.

Students live today in a "Twitter" culture. Maybe, but linguistic registers change according to the context of situation. As academics we are developing the students' use of formal academic registers in order to help them communicate certain types of information in professional, vocational or academic contexts.

Again, I could continue. There's so much to say, and to debate. Once again, thanks to Maha.

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