

WHY THEY DO NOT READ? A PERSONAL STATEMENT

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"Whenever faculty get together to talk about student writing or critical thinking, they inevitably turn also to problems of student reading."
(John Bean, 1996)

"The formulation of the problem is more important than the solution." Albert Einstein

"The Times they are a-changing" (Bob Dylan, 1964)

CLT has provided the space (in Newsletters, Workshops and Fora) for the debate over student reading to continue since Maha Bali initiated it. It is a debate that I feel passionately about and for this reason I ask for your indulgence to allow me to make a further contribution in the form of a personal statement rather than my professional status as Associate Director of CLT. As I reflected over what has been presented up to now I found myself returning to my undergraduate days at Princeton University and how I achieved learning. What figures centrally in this reflection is the spring semester of 1970 when my learning curve jumped geometrically and I became aware of knowledge that had never appeared on my radar screen before. Let me elaborate.

On Thursday, April 30th, 1970 Nixon invaded Cambodia and the student movement along with many other socio-political organizations responded dynamically. In several campuses there were extensive demonstrations and occupations of administration buildings. On May 4th, 1970 State troopers fired on student demonstrators at Kent State University and left four students dead and nine injured. This added fuel to the fire and in Princeton we occupied Nassau Hall (main administrative building). What followed for the rest of the semester was equivalent, in my mind, to an epistemological break or paradigm shift. The discussions that took place among students and faculty went far beyond the war in south-east Asia and challenged the very process of education and learning at Princeton. We challenged the curriculum, syllabi, teaching strategies, etc. Many faculty joined in these discussions and what emerged introduced major differences in how students would manage their own learning henceforth. Independent Study was introduced as part of the curriculum and students were allowed to design courses and select readings in consultation with faculty. Black and Gender Studies were initiated and in some departments such as Middle East Studies (in which I was following a minor) the traditional prevailing pedagogy of teaching Arabic was rejected in favor of a more dynamic approach which emphasized spoken colloquial courses. This was seen as anathema to traditional orientalist pedagogy that had rejected the spoken Arabic of the Middle East in favor of what they termed pure classical Arabic with focus on grammar, syntax and written texts only. Changes were also introduced into the history, politics and sociology of the Middle East that challenged traditional orientalist epistemologies. Students across the University took ownership of their learning and introduced interactive and student-centered learning in an academic establishment that had prioritized tradition over active learning.

As an alumnus of Princeton I believe these events in the Spring of 1970 enhanced teaching and learning at Princeton and contributed to its remarkable position as a major undergraduate college within the Ivy League in the USA. This was also the year when on June 9th, 1970 Bob Dylan was awarded an Honorary Doctorate in Musicⁱ and both Huey Newton and Bobby Seale (founders of the Black Panthers) were invited as guest lecturers. The Princeton of yesterday was challenged, found wanting and transformed by joint student-faculty initiatives. Students and faculty together opened FitzRandolph Gate which has been locked for decades and it symbolized the unity of the University with the community. The gate is still open and community-based learning is still a major part of the Princeton curriculum.

In some respects what happened in Egypt on January 25th, 2011 is very similar to what transformed higher education in the USA in the 1970s. Many of us in the older generation groups experienced these transformations and more than likely benefited significantly intellectually and academically. The problem I feel is that we have now forgotten these events and are in danger of becoming the "conventional" stalwarts of the early 1970s that were challenged by students and many faculty. As Bob Dylan notes in his song "The Times they are a-changing" and this applies to every epoch where major socio-political transformations occur. I am quite confident that most faculty at AUC would agree that the answer to the question "What does it mean to be Literate in the 21st century" will include a variety of new literacies that did not even exist when I was an undergraduate. Thus as a faculty member at AUC I do have to ask myself "What literacies should I be teaching?" Of course all would agree that the basics (reading, writing) need to be taught, but so should the new-literacies: critical and visual-literacies, understand and read the world as opposed to text, social literacy, how to read people and relationships and outdoor literacy (our environment) to mention but a few.

If we accept the above then we also have to ask ourselves what is the new role of the faculty and in particular what role does educational technology have in promoting these new literacies. I believe that the answer to the first question is widely accepted and modern pedagogy has underscored the importance of faculty becoming facilitators of learning rather than teachers as such. The conventional lecture-based course has been challenged and found wanting. The answer to the second question, however, is yet to gain wide professional acceptance. This is despite the fact that we do recognize that students are the technology era natives and we the faculty are the immigrants. Our students are bombarded daily by electronic and visual information, but do not necessarily have the skills to interpret, evaluate and use this plethora of data thrown at them. The question that arises, therefore, is “Does literacy need to be redefined?” Clearly in the world in which we live to associate literacy solely with reading texts is to ignore our surrounding environment and fail our students. In the 21st century media literacy will not be a hobby or luxury, it will be a necessity. Our students will shape the 21st century and the tools they will need are multiple literacies including technological and media literacies. I believe it is our duty as educators to both facilitate this new learning and to ensure that they are capable of using it in a critical learning context. To do this we must not only allow them to use it in courses, but in fact we must encourage them to integrate it in a sound pedagogic way into their learning. Leading pedagogist Dr Joan Lippincott has emphasized this in her pioneering work on “convergence of literacies” and so have many other pioneers in modern pedagogy. CLT, of course has pioneered such issues at AUC and many faculty have already embraced the new challenge in very creative new teaching strategies.

“Reading is Fundamental” (RIF) was a major campaign slogan in the 1970s for K+12 and in some respects it still is a key teaching strategy in most of higher education. Nevertheless, “*a consistent pattern of research findings has established compliance with course reading at 20-30% for any given day and assignment. Faculty face the stark and depressing challenge of facilitating learning when over 70% of the students will not have read assigned course readings.*” (Eric Hobson, n.d.) Hobson goes on to demonstrate that “*surveys show that students see a weak relationship between course reading and academic success. Student perception and linked behavior collected in the National Survey of Student Engagement (2001) for example, underscores the extent to which students relegate course reading to the margins of necessary activity; most college students reported that they do not read course assignments.*” Clearly we are confronted with substantive research evidence that university students are sending a strong message and have been doing so for at least a decade or more. The fundamental question for us as educators is how we propose to shape our classrooms and accordingly transform our teaching strategies. We need to move towards problem-solving not compliance with traditional teaching strategies that prioritize “reading literacy” and away from “one size fits all”.

It is also vital to recognize that this generation is motivated differently with regard to learning and that skills for a successful career, skills for life-long learning and skills for active and informed citizenship have converged. To focus on “reading literacy” alone is to deny our students certain vital skills they will need. Content is, of course, also important and thus we need to explore ways of integrating learning technologies with textbooks and also try to use content to teach such core skills. For the “net generation” that we teach “a bad day is having a slow internet connection”, but it is also a generation “that wants to make a difference”. Similar to Princeton in Spring 1970, post-revolution Egypt has created the space and provides the opportunity for this to happen, it is up to faculty to educate for innovation. To do so is also to take on board the fact that the 21st century survival skills our students need are different. They “*need critical thinking and problem-solving, collaboration across networks and leading by influence, agility and adaptability, initiative and entrepreneurialism, effective communication, accessing and analyzing/evaluating information, curiosity and imagination.*” (Tom Grant, 2011) Reading or even enhanced reading skills alone will not provide those additional skills. The challenge is there and it is for us as faculty and 21st century educators to seek the solution to the problem together with our students.

N.B. The above issues will be discussed at a CLT workshop entitled “**Teaching/Learning Strategies that challenge “Reading is Fundamental”**”, on Sunday, March 25th from 2 to 3.15 pm. and a CLT Forum entitled “**21st Century Dilemmas in Academic Reading**”, on Thursday, May 3rd from 1 to 2 pm. Please attend and contribute to this vital debate at AUC.

References

- Bean, J.C. (1996). *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hobson, Eric (n.d.) *Getting Students to Read*, Center for Teaching and Learning Services Newsletter, Concordia University, <http://teaching.concordia.ca/news-and-events/the-mentor-newsletter/getting-students-to-read/index.php#top> – accessed on March 17th, 2012.
- Grant, Tom (2011) *21st Century Skills*, Thinking About Leadership, found in <http://thinkingaboutleadership.org/2011/10/28/21st-century-skills/>

ⁱ Bob Dylan wrote another one of his classic songs that year entitled “*Day of the Locusts*” with reference to that day when he was awarded the honorary degree. Thus, the class of 1970 adopted the motto “*In Locusts Parentis*” to the present day!