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A Commentary on the Report “Reading at Risk”

The National Endowment for the Arts recently published a study, *The Decline of Reading*, showing that fewer and fewer adults and college age people are reading literature. As a Professor of English and founder of a Great Books Curriculum at Wright Community College in Chicago, whose population is predominantly minority and non traditional, I spend more or less every day working on the effects of adults not reading and observing key reasons for it. But before proceeding further I have to confess my concern is with the decline of serious literature in its broadest sense. I do not believe it matters one way or the other whether adults are or are not reading the light literature—mysteries, westerns, spy novels or watching such things on television.

Now, there is one key reason for this decline that never talked about. It is like the dead elephant behind the couch and nothing will improve until it changes. This is that many English faculty do not read or teach serious literature and neither the institution they work for nor the publishing houses that provide them with textbooks nor the field itself wants them to.

Now plainly, reading serious literature with proficiency and ease is not an inborn human trait; it is a skill and adults are far less likely to read serious *literature if they have never been taught how to do it and consequently never experienced the deep and unique satisfactions doing so brings.*

Today, a community college faculty interested in using serious literature as the basis of work in core composition courses faces an uphill battle of persuading the department and the administration that doing so is of more value to students than teaching how to write a cover letter for a resume, a letter of complaint to a merchant or a movie review. They must tirelessly point out He must be pointed out that the ability to read and respond to serious literature develops the ability to abstract the universally true from the particular. It dramatically increases cultural literacy and historical awareness and by doing so uniquely instills in students a perspective on their lives and knowledge of the world around them they can get in no other way. Ideas take on reality only when epitomized in a word and the reading of serious literature is instrumental in enlarging students by increasing their vocabulary. Even the partial master of serious literature boosts the academic self confidence and self esteem of students and prepares them for the increased proficiency that comes with subsequent exposures.

These skills and opportunities are especially crucial for the minority and non traditional students taught at community colleges. Unfortunately, the odds of these students being able to gain these benefits are long, very long and what is worse is that it is not their fault, but the profession's

These are the reasons why. For one, it is immensely more important to a typical community college administrator that a new English department faculty hire be of the

correct ethnic category to satisfy diversity hiring quotas than that the faculty be well and widely read in serious literature.

Also, many English faculty themselves do not want to teach serious literature and would rather teach students about things like movies, comic books with social content, science fiction and left wing causes dear to their hearts. Serious literature does not interest them and they are like lawyers bored by the law but unable to switch fields. And they are encouraged in their alternate pursuits in a field that considers teaching such fare “innovative” and “cutting edge.”

It is so ingrained today as to be taken for granted in English Departments at community colleges that their field itself considers literature unimportant, optional, and of far less pedagogical value than reprints of magazine articles and op-ed pieces. If faculty make a serious and comprehensive effort to teach serious literature in place of these things, or express disdain for teaching journalism instead of serious literature in core composition courses, they can quickly become objects of suspicion and resentment by administration and colleagues.

There are two reasons for this. One is that in too many cases faculty are not able to read serious literature—they don’t have the intellectual skills or the intellectual hunger or ambition or above all, the curiosity—and so naturally they feel implicitly threatened by others who do. But rather than diligently attempting to fill in their intellectual blanks it is just easier and more gratifying to angrily resent the more literate and anathematize them as elitists and snobs.

In fact, the problem of serious literature not being taught in English department has now been regnant for so long that today job candidates arrive from colleges where *their* professors did not teach *them* literature *either* and so they arrive knowing nothing about the question other than an aversion to it that can be paraphrased as: “Who cares about all that stuffy pointy headed serious literature stuff which is too boring and hard and anyhow I am a better teacher than someone who is well read because *I* can *relate* to my students because *I* can have them write about rap artists and other aspects of popular culture.”

In hiring committee meetings *with fellow tenured English professors* it is common for a faculty member who strongly advocates hiring a candidate who is conversant with serious literature to be told “We don’t *just* need *literature* teachers. You don’t have to be a *literature* teacher to work here.” And so the advocate is reduced to pleading to ears of varying degrees of deafness: “Being unread does not make you a moral leper. Many people are far superior human being than people who are well read. In the grand scheme of things it is much more important to be a good human being. But *it is not too much to expect that someone looking to be hired in an English Department* be well read.”

Admittedly, a dean and department chair at the far larger and more prestigious and influential University of Illinois at Chicago disagree. I had this impressed upon me when at a conference where he delivered a paper entitled “Why It Does Not Matter What You Read” while his colleague recommended students be assigned newspaper columnists writing television reviews which he called “criticism”

And so the question still stands: how are students going to learn how to read serious literature, or have their lives changed as routinely happens when they are exposed to the insights and truths serious literature imparts, if English departments don’t expose them to it? Students arrive at college heavily handicapped by cultural illiteracy and an

intellectual imagination untrained and unable to abstract relevance from anything outside their immediate knowledge and experience. They are paying tuition and attending class to have these handicaps removed. Instead they are betrayed and horribly cheated by the message be too many English faculty communicate by what they don't teach and what they teach instead: that students should take no interest in and hold in no special respect serious. What is important is the current popular culture fad.

Like the French Police Chief in *Casablanca* who is "shocked, shocked" to see gambling going on a Rick's Café as a croupier hands him last night's winnings, we can only feign amazement to see the NEA document the decline in reading serious literature when in the one castle keep given sole responsibility in the world for cherishing and defending and teaching serious literature you find instead faculty with so anemic a moral and intellectual imagination that they are unwilling to or incapable of doing the hard and immensely rewarding work of teaching students why something they do not know about like *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is actually more relevant to their lives than writing essays about what the latest obscene gesture by an athlete during a sporting event says about our society.

These anti-intellectual, anti high culture attitudes have terrible effects on students and what they do—or rather, don't read at college and during the rest of their lives. And it is an attitude shared by many college administrations and the educational publishing industry. Too many administrations are openly suspicious of teaching literature in their shop. Compositions courses are seen by them as the basic job of community college English departments, the courses that pay the bills, the cleaning-the-grout-with-a-toothbrush work which is why we hired you. Teaching literature is looked upon as "fun" and therefore automatically "getting out of doing your job." This is an attitude that says literature has no necessary connection to anything of universal and fundamental usefulness and importance and that mastery of literature is a self evident sign of general intellectual competence and a high degree of cultural literacy that naturally filters into what students are taught and exposed to.

As a past ALSC study has pointed out, in core composition courses literature isn't taught. Composition courses are truly *literature rein*.

But things are worse than this for *even if you wanted to use serious literature as the basis of a core composition course you will not be able to find a textbook that does it*. The typical composition text book consists of reprints of general interest magazine articles that by their nature do nothing to raise cultural literacy, illuminate perennial and universal problems of the human condition and are inoffensive enough to enable the publisher to sell the most copies. The topics are mundane politically correct clichés. Should the government help the homeless or let them keel over dead in the streets? Should there be racial profiling? Is multiculturalism a good thing? Is war good? Is a materialist society morally permissible? (Typically posed by an author and presented by a publisher who are doing so to make the largest possible profit for themselves) Should corporations supply child care? My favorite was an article on cell phone usage while driving whose point was to get students to write on whether it should be permitted or not.

So much is this so that I and a few colleagues at Wright are presently trying to work up our own literature rich versions of the standard English composition class so that we can offer something that will enrich our students and inspire and stimulate ourselves.

In doing this we are forced like so many Robinson Crusoes, to fashion intellectual tools and pedagogical living quarters out of things we find on the beach.

None of this would matter of course unless something very important and serious was at stake. Why else, to quote Bob and Ray, this “threnody, this jeremiad call it what you will”?

Let me demonstrate it with a piece of anecdotal evidence. As I mentioned earlier I am the founder of the Wright College Great Books Curriculum which serves minority and non traditional students. This semester I am requiring my students for my research paper and argumentation course, English 102 write their papers and base our in class discussions on the first four books of Titus Livy’s *History of Rome*. Livy is a superb storyteller and the first four books contain rousing versions of many of the most important myths of Western Civilization. Of equal and greater importance, the first four books constitute one of the most eye opening and influential accounts in history of ongoing class conflict between the rich and the poor and how it was painfully resolved through changes in the Roman government from an oligarchy to something approaching a democracy.

Students studying these materials learned nothing about whether one should talk on a cell phone while driving or not but they did get a chance to think about class conflict in a setting uncontaminated by the views of their friends, family and the media as normally happens with present day “relevant” events. They did not discuss the virtues of corporations providing day care but they were able to make connections in class discussions however between ancient world issues and their contemporary equivalents—that is, to practice without realizing it their capacity to abstract the universal from the particular. They were able to study the different forms of duplicitousness practiced by typical politicians—and back then when politics was truly a blood sport.

Moreover, they are now equipped to be surprised and impressed at seeing the same social conflicts over the question of redistribution of land and the nature of bankruptcy laws discussed in Madison’s *Federalist #10* and in Machiavelli’s *Discourses* where he looks at Livy’s account in analyzing the dangers in changing the reform of the constitution of his native Florence. (Needless to say they had not heard of either author or work prior to taking the class) I went online the other day and ran across a description of a 300 level course in the classics department of a major university which concerned the decemvirs and realized with a shock that my working class, minority and non traditional students are now in a position to know exactly what that professor will be examining.

I know this because in a paper written by a young working class Phillipino woman last night she wrote the following thesis paragraph, which while not something that is going to make anyone forget the ideas of Plato and Aristotle to which she was exposed does show the birth of the ability to think about and handle ideas of deep importance.

The focus of this paper is justice. To some people justice can be defined as the stronger rules the weak. Although the strongest may not be the smartest of the fairest. To others justice can be defined as fairness, integrity or even equality. This paper will examine the tyranny of Appius and the decemvirs and how practical values of justice keep a society functioning smoothly.

By reading Livy these students also incidentally increased their cultural literacy without realizing it. They now know about Aeneas and Anchises, Romulus and Remus, Horatius at the Bridge, the Rape of the Sabine Women, the Twelve Tables of the Law and the decemvirs, King Numa, the Tarpeian Rock, Scaevola and so on.

In this particular regard, apropos of the problem we have been examining, these minority and non traditional students are now in some ways more culturally literate than many faculty, although in fairness it must also be admitted though that these students walked out of the classroom knowing nothing more about cell phone usage while driving than when they came in.