

Reading for Love (and Learning)

by
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So much depends on reading. On the job, in school, in personal health and in family life, reading well can make all the difference between success and failure. As teachers, we know that reading is key to writing well, to studying well, to becoming an independent life-long learner. But in this time of electronic images, the resurgence of visual and symbolic culture, teaching students to read books, using the old linear technology, is a daunting task. They are used to reading bits and pieces, advertisements and headlines, receipts and recipes, not to turning two hundred and fifty pages in order.

Summertime. Sunlight filters through the trees as I finish *What It's Like to Live Now*, a memoir by Meredith Maran. At midnight, leaning against my pillows, I struggle through painful scenes of the Vietnam War in *After Sorrow* by Lady Borton. As I sip tea in my kitchen on a cloudy afternoon, Carolyn Forché's poetry sends me into reminiscence and longing I didn't know I had. *Rads* by Tom Bates makes the terrifying days of the late sixties come alive in my nineties living room. Reading and longing, reading and remembering, reading and learning happen as I move from academic journals to poetry of witness, from pop novels to serious fiction. As I read, my mind works beyond the page to call up powerful emotions, past experiences, connections I've never made before. Time passes, an afternoon in the office, an evening

in the public library; hours dissolve into thought, absorbing meaning from books. In this I'm not unusual, but just a normal good reader, like most teachers, like many people. But not like many of my students.

On the first day of class my students grasp their books tightly; they have spent many dollars they can't really afford on these heavy blocks of paper. As we preview our textbooks each semester, their body language is rigid, uncomfortable. Many do not wish to page through, looking at chapter titles, reading the end first. They prefer to keep their books pristine, pages unturned. Annotation seems like a violation to them. They have learned not to touch, not to ruffle, not to use. Their physical relationship with books reflects the discomfort of an apprentice with an unfamiliar tool. Perhaps there is a danger lurking in its use. Perhaps there is embarrassment at not knowing how.

During my sixteen years at Roxbury Community College I have struggled to teach English Composition I and II, the freshman writing courses that provide the basis for the next three years of college work. Teaching writing is difficult, even heart-breaking at times, but always truly exciting as students begin to find their own voices. Unfortunately many students are halted in their development as writers when they begin to do research. For them, reading is a barrier. They are able to read short articles, essays, and pieces of textbooks with effort, but reading longer and more difficult passages is closed to them. They do not have the reading experience to understand the context of the books and articles they find in their research. A few years ago, I decided I had to face the reading barrier and address it much more directly in my teaching. What follows is an account of my search for an approach that would help my students gain skills and experience and find enjoyment in reading. I have not found easy answers, but I do have some positive steps to report.

As a first step in confronting my students' reading problems, I decided to try teaching the Pre-College Reading course. It was developed by the English Department to give focused study to students who could not achieve mid-high school reading level on the standardized tests used to place students in English Composition I. By looking at the problems at an earlier point in a student's college career, I thought I could understand them better. I believe that what I found is similar to what many ABE teachers face.

There are more differences than similarities among my students in a typical class in Pre-College Reading.

They come from different language backgrounds. Some have come from the ESOL program at RCC; others have learned English on their own as adults. A significant number have serious life problems. There are often students with physical challenges in class. One or two may identify themselves as having learning problems. But even so, for the vast majority of students, decoding is not a problem. They have mastered the mechanics of reading, but words trip them and larger meanings elude them. To use reading to think through an issue, to illuminate life, to see the metaphorical nature of literature,

to enjoy the art of poetry, these are doors that my students have not yet had the opportunity to open. What they share most is an amazing (to me anyway) lack of experience in reading.

I prepared to teach Pre-College Reading with a review of the available texts from the major academic publishers. I settled on the

Reading Skills Handbook and its later multi-cultural version *All of Us*.¹ These are well constructed books. Skills are carefully delineated, clearly explained, neatly exemplified. We worked through the books with reasonable interest and attention, making a little progress, moving forward in most cases. But for most of my students there is a long way to go. Moving up a few percentiles on a test, achieving one higher grade level in a semester is certainly progress, but not enough. Moving at that rate means that the student remains in pre-college courses for several semesters. This creates a danger of personal discouragement and of official failure to make academic progress. The drop-out rate for students in pre-college courses is high.

An assignment I originally gave in Children's Literature, a sophomore-level course taken mainly by English and Early Childhood Education majors, led me to change my approach. That assignment is a short personal essay telling the story of how the student learned to read and reflecting on that experience. As I read these essays for several semesters I noted that they were of two kinds. Many people told wonderful stories of favorite books, storytelling grandparents, angelic first grade teachers. But many did not. There was a significant group that wrote about their lack of positive experiences with reading and the way they overcame it. One top student, who later won a full scholarship to the University of Massachusetts, confided that he had only learned to read well in high school. His early experiences with reading were so traumatic that rather than reflect on them, he requested (and received) an alternative assignment. I reasoned that

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if these students, now successfully pursuing college studies, had so many negative experiences with reading, this would only be more common in students who had not yet tested into college courses.

I began to give a parallel journal-writing assignment in my Pre-College Reading class. The results should not have been surprising. The majority of students could not remember a favorite book from childhood. They did not associate any positive memories with reading. Some remembered a particular grade when they began having trouble, and in some cases when they got extra help. Of course there were exceptions, but in general the students having trouble with reading did not report positive experiences. For them reading was a school chore, not a life passion or pleasure. I reasoned that I had to take this negative emotional charge very seriously and find a way to counteract it in my classes.

As I reflected on how to address this, I came back to my own experience with reading as pleasure, relaxation, learning. I decided to try to capture my students' affections with books, with good stories as the bait. I settled on

a collection of short stories with easy reading levels and an approachable format, and I assigned students to choose and read a novel.² The short stories were a hit from the start because they allowed everyone to have an opinion and made the class come together in spite of all our differences. The novels presented more of a challenge.

The first version of my novel assignment asked the students to choose and read a novel on their own. At the end of the semester they were to give a five-minute oral report, briefly summarizing the book and giving their own opinion of it. They had to write out a bibliography card in a format that might be used in research. I kept these cards and made a collective bibliography for them at the end of the semester. But at the beginning, I found that we had to talk about what a novel is and I had to bring in many examples. I had ordered a few copies of several novels that I thought students would enjoy. They were in the college bookstore so students could look them over before choosing. I also took them to the college library to look at the best-seller shelves and showed them the collection of used paperbacks that I lend out from my



office. I thought this would surely be enough alternatives to give each student a chance to pick out an interesting and not-too-difficult book.

I was wrong. While my strategy did work for a quarter to a third of the class, it failed with the rest. They did not go to the bookstore, or if they did, they did not buy a book. They did not go to their local libraries, and they did not take books out of the college library. Only a handful borrowed books from my office. Instead, they asked their friends and family and picked up whatever books were lying around, if they picked a book at all. Many chose books that were not novels, prompting some very detailed looks in class at book jackets, title pages, etc. Some picked young adult books or children's books. I allowed YA books as long as the reading level was above fifth grade, warning the student that he or she might find the book childish. The children's books I declined to approve. They kept looking. Sometimes they brought in pulp novels based on movies. These I did approve with a warning that they might not be worth the effort to read, especially if one had already seen the movie, as was usually the case. I remember one talented young man who read the book based on the movie, *Hook*. When he finally gave his oral report, he rated the book low and wished that he had spent his time on a better book.

There were some sparks. A few students really loved their books and showed it in the oral reports. One woman who had been treated for dyslexia for years gave a cogent report on *The Bridges of Madison County*, commenting on the non-chronological structure of the novel and how it differed from the movie. But still the majority were unmoved. Either they did not find a book that they could read, or they did not complete the assignment. Less than half got credit for it each semester. I realized that I had to make a change. I reviewed my reasons for assigning a novel and they still were sound. A good novel would allow students to develop several reading skills: sustained interest and attention, speed, ability to read for story line and not look up every word, affective involvement, self-confidence. I kept working on it.

Since then I have changed the assignment, benefiting from suggestions from colleagues and summing up the experience each semester. The course I give now goes like this. We begin reading short stories and I present necessary literary terms: plot, character, theme, point of view,

setting. After students have read about five short stories, they can grasp the meaning of these terms through comparison and contrast. Then I give out an assignment asking the students to read four two-page excerpts from novels and to decide from these which novels they would like to read as a class.³ The class votes after everyone has had a chance to read the hand-out for a week. Anyone who didn't read it wouldn't know which book to vote for. I do not bring in the books so that book jackets, critics' remarks and length are not considered. The students

have to choose based on the representative samples I have given them. Why is this better than previewing the actual books? I think it is because the students must focus on content and they do not automatically choose the shortest book. Also, I have only one set of the books, so each student would only get a few seconds to handle a book being passed around, but the eight-page hand-out is theirs to keep, and they do spend the time needed to read it.

Perhaps it was the air of mystery and competition around this assignment the first time I used it that caused almost everyone to read the hand-out and have an opinion. The books under consideration were: *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* by Terry McMillan, *The Bean Trees* by Barbara Kingsolver, *Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Myers, and *Ishmael* by Daniel Quinn. In two classes out of three, *Stella* won hands down. In the other class more than half chose to read *Fallen Angels*, perhaps because male characters and subject matter dominate and that class was three-quarters men. The students had to read about fifty pages per week in order to complete the assignment since *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* has 445 pages. At first they were fearful, but I resolutely scheduled quizzes every other week and most students kept up with the reading. And most were able to answer successfully the final exam essay question on the novel.

The next semester I repeated this process and students chose to read *Breath, Eyes, Memory* by Edwidge Danticat. This is a beautiful coming-of-age novel about a young Haitian girl who goes to live with her estranged mother in New York and eventually reconnects with both her mother and her family in Haiti. We read the novel in about six chunks and had at least a brief discussion of each. By the end of the course students were able to look for repeated symbols and begin to talk about how they connected to the story. They wrote three short

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essays on the final exam on the theme, characters and an overall assessment of the impact of the book. The papers showed that even the weakest students had a reasonable grasp of the novel. An additional advantage to this novel was that four Haitian students who had been a bit isolated in the class were drawn in by the Haitian cultural context and setting.

What have I learned from these experiments with pre-college readers and novels? Most students can read a long novel, follow the story, critique and discuss it and answer essay questions about it. They are able to visualize the book as a whole and do some basic literary analysis. They gain confidence, and a sense of pleasure in reading from doing so. I don't yet have all the comparative data to show how this affects their standardized test scores. But I believe it definitely affects their attitude toward reading and their view of themselves as readers. Last June I gave out a summer reading list, and a number of students approached me in the fall to tell me which novels they had read from the list. In addition, ESOL students take a big step forward when reading a novel. They must stop using the dictionary all the time and learn to grasp the meaning of unfamiliar words from the context; it is simply too time-consuming to look up every new word. I also encourage them to give up their translation dictionaries and use a regular English dictionary, so they get fuller sets of meanings for words they feel they really must look up.

What I learned about the structure of the assignment is that, while students want to have a choice, the full responsibility of choosing a novel on their own is perhaps too much for many very inexperienced readers, even with lots of guidance. Thus my earlier versions of the assignment were less successful in getting students to find and commit to reading a book. My second version of the

assignment has been much more successful. Giving the class excerpts and asking them to choose as a group from only four book choices was empowering, especially for the weaker students. Having the whole class read the same novel allows discussions to develop and creates positive energy and motivation.

I see an excitement and interest in the class that did not exist when we worked through the textbook drills and readings in earlier semesters. Students get angry, enthusiastic, passionate about issues in the novel. Sometimes these involve adult content regarding sexual issues or violence. Since we are all adults, these are fair game for discussion. I should note that the novels I choose are literary, not pulp. Sex and violence have been a part of great literature at least since Sophocles wrote *Oedipus Rex*, so I feel that it is reasonable to include this kind of material when it occurs in the novel.

My advice to teachers is: Go ahead! Design an assignment based on a novel. Talk about what a novel is, read some short stories to teach some basic concepts and vocabulary about literature, then plunge right in! Let your students in on the joys of losing themselves in a good book.

Footnotes:

- 1) C. Bazerman, *Reading Skills Handbook* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998); C. Bazerman, *All of Us* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).
- 2) The current text I am using is *Views and Values* by Kari Sayer (Wadsworth, 1996).
- 3) I first saw this assignment format demonstrated by Elaine Dow at the MATSOL Fall Conference, October 18, 1997, in her session entitled "Challenging Intermediate Level Readers." •