

## **Working with Primary Text in the Undergraduate Curriculum**

**James Young, Ph.D.**  
Professor of English  
Weber State University  
Ogden, Utah 84403  
United States of America

Where in the undergraduate curriculum are the great primary works of history, philosophy, political science, physics, and psychology read? Where are the great biographies, autobiographies, letters, journals, essays, scientific treatises, and histories of the founding thinkers of each discipline systematically read and studied? From my observations of the undergraduate curriculum, these “primary text” are not being read. Instead, generalized and encyclopedia summaries of these original works are used in massive textbooks. What we have are unnamed editors summing up in an automated style what Matthew Arnold called the “Best that has been thought and said” in the history of a culture.

Most undergraduate courses within any discipline from the freshman level to the senior level are controlled by these generalized textbooks. Just take a walk within the stacks of any college or university bookstore across America and you will see the same books: An Introduction to Psychology, An Introduction to Sociology or Anthropology, A Survey of the History of the United States or A Survey of World History. It is not unusual to find a recent graduate in the field of psychology who has never read the primary texts of Freud, Jung, Adler, Hillman, or Gardner or to find a history major who has never read Tacitus or Gibbon much less Tuchman, Manchester, Toynbee, or Durant.

Even in some graduate schools, students are rushed past the classics that have created their discipline in order to engage in the current research of the day. Why read William James and Sigmund Freud, they seem to be thinking, when you can be prescribing some new psychotropic drug for some troublesome human disorder. Why bother with the psychological complexities of understanding the human condition when you can prescribe a pill to ameliorate a personal problem. Last week I heard on a local radio station a nameless voice advertise that if you had an elder member of your family who was experiencing loss of memory, who was sometimes disoriented and forgetful, please get in touch with Dr. X at X University Hospital because you might be selected to participate in an experimental drug program—“absolutely free!” I wonder if it ever occurred to the medical profession that in some cases aging and its attendant problems might be natural and that some old people actually choose to forget because they are tired of remembering.

I think the undergraduate curriculum would be immensely enriched if each discipline included more primary text into every course of study, not just the classics but also the current work of scholars who are shaping the various fields of study. Undergraduate courses in psychology could read not only William James but also James Hillman and Thomas More; in physics not just Maxwell and Faraday but also Steven Hawking and David Bohm; studies in biology could bring the arguments of Charles Darwin up to date with the works of Loren Eiseley and Stephen Gould. What many undergraduates have not discovered is that both classic and modern scholars are imminently readable, and they possess a freshness and power that no secondhand summary can provide.

In an article I wrote a few years ago for the *Utah Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters*, I spoke of the power that reading a certain primary text had for me. The author was the anthropologist Loren Eiseley, the work was his autobiography, *All the Strange Hours*. I wrote, “Although Eiseley in several of his essays sang the praises of the human mind’s ability to construct systems of thought to understand the workings of nature, he harbored deep misgivings about the mind’s ability to fathom the ultimate mysteries of life:”

I am an evolutionist. [Yet, there is] nothing to explain the necessity of life, nothing to explain the hunger of the elements to become life, nothing to explain why the stolid realm of rock and soil and mineral should diversify itself into beauty, terror, and uncertainty. . . . In the world there is nothing below a certain depth that is truly explanatory. It is as if matter dreamed and muttered in its sleep. But why, and for what reason it dreams, there is no evidence (*Hours*, 242).

If you were to present such a passage to an undergraduate biology or anthropology class today, imagine the vitality and energy of the classroom discussion that it would cause. Why do we hide such treasures of knowledge and power from our undergraduates?

As a teacher of literature and as an English educator, I often encourage secondary and college teachers to go beyond their textbooks to offer compelling and exciting contemporary primary texts of non-fiction to incorporate into their curriculum; works like James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Rachel Carson's *Silent Springs*, Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Brian Green's *The Elegant Universe*, Richard Rodriguez, *The Hunger for Memory*, Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth*, John McPhee *Coming into the Country*, Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge*, Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*, Peter Matheson's *The Snow Leopard*, Crick and Watson's *The Double Helix*, Studs Terkel's *Working*, Chet Raymo's *The Soul of the Night*, Alan Lightman's *Einstein's Dreams*, Richard Tarnas' *The Passions of the Western Mind*, and Thomas Moore's *The Care of the Soul*. The list goes on and on of exciting primary works of non-fictional.

I would like to review the reading comprehension techniques that teachers have used in the past to work with primary text and to describe a new classroom strategy that I have found particularly effective. There are many excellent traditional ways of working with primary texts like an essay by Joseph Campbell or Lewis Thomas. A teacher typically assigns the work to be read and then the next day conducts a discussion to bring out the key points of the text, or a teacher might provide a series of questions to be answered either during or after the student has read the text. Other useful comprehension strategies are to ask students to outline an essay in order to reveal its logical structure and mode of development. A series of questions can be asked by the instructor about style, tone, and the placement of parts that contribute to the significance of the whole. Teachers of rhetoric often explore the issues of who wrote the essay and why, asking the student to define the intended audience and the purpose of the essay, making them aware that essays do not exist in a vacuum, that to discover the political and sociological forces at play is to come to terms with the author's intention and reason for writing.

All these comprehension strategies are useful because they help a student understand the key points that the author is trying to convey. However, analyzing a text is only the first step in becoming a responsive reader. I would like to propose a new, more active classroom strategy for working with primary text. I have found that this teaching method yields good results with students and leads them into a personal relationship with the readings that they are assigned to study. I call this teaching strategy "Dialoguing with a Text," and it is adapted from the works of Peter Elbow, Ann Berthoff and others who have contributed to a body of literature known as "Writing across the Curriculum" (Berthoff, Elbow).

It's my belief that many students read passively. They have been encouraged to read only so they can pass an objective test that measures their mastery of the content. Often they fail to enter into a true communication with an author. They fail to examine what the effects of the writing have on their personal lives and beliefs. In dialoguing with a text, a student is encouraged to enter into a conversation with the author. To do this a student must first understand that all print is nothing more than frozen speech, and that behind every book that they read, a human being is speaking directly to them. You would be surprised to see how few undergraduates understand this basic fact of reading. Some of them have a vague notion that books are produced from automated sources of knowledge, something akin to anonymous sites on the Internet or articles in an encyclopedia.

Once students begin to grasp that writers are speaking directly to them and that authors have their own points of view and values, they begin to feel the power and excitement of talking back to a writer. I encourage them to read as if they are being spoken to directly and to respond in writing as if they are holding up their end of the conversation. I ask them to select from the text what Peter Elbow calls "Hot Spots." These are passages that excite the student either positively or negatively. Then I ask them to go back over the text and choose one or two hot spots to respond to in writing. Their writing response may take many forms as they seek to establish a personal relation to the text and talk with the author.

A student might begin an argument with the author saying, "No, that's not right. In my experience I have found the opposite to be true," and then they go on to describe their point of view. Another student might be puzzled by a passage yet sense that something of value is being said, perhaps something disturbing that the student has yet to see clearly. That student might "free write" for 10 or 15 minutes about the source of uncertainty, trying to define what it is that is unclear.

Sometimes a student is surprised to see that as he or she defines what is confusing them or what is difficult or unclear, somehow miraculously the darkness lifts, and they begin to see through their writing what was at first hidden. Two other ways that students often respond is to recount a personal experience that relates to the passage that they have chosen. When they do that something exciting happens. Through their exploratory writing, they begin to forge personal connections and links to the text. They begin to see how their world of experience supports or refutes what an author is asserting.

I also like to see another type of response when a student takes an idea and begins to trace out its implications. They write, “If this were true or if we were to adopt this new position toward whatever subject is being discussed in the essay—Art or Work or Computers or Education—then this is what would follow. That idea if accepted would make these differences in my world.” As a teacher these are exciting moments for me when I see a student begin to think for themselves in response to provocative new ideas from primary texts. I believe that this activity is at the heart of the academic enterprise. Through dialoguing with primary texts, students become part of the ongoing conversations within their discipline by comprehending key concepts that a text raises, analyzing assertions, challenging basic premises and assumptions, tracing out the implications of ideas, and raising new questions for future study.

I recently heard Carl Grant from the University of Wisconsin express this idea at a conference on multicultural education. During a question and answer period after his address, he began to tease a group of young graduate students who were too timid to take part in the discussion. He said to them, “You must begin to talk and think, question and challenge, and write about these issues if you ever intend to create knowledge in your field of study for yourself and your profession.”

Some teachers might protest, “What about the text that you are studying. Aren’t you ignoring the work when you encourage students to develop personal connections between themselves and the text? My answer is that we are not ignoring the text because all the classroom conversations begin with the text and often return to it. Yet the scope of conversations does indeed expand to include not only the text but also the world of the student. I find the expanded study fascinating and exciting. I have also found that in using this response centered technique of reading and writing, we usually cover all the major issues of the text.

I illustrate this point by drawing a large square on the board with circles imposed on top of it, part of the circles falling within the square and part outside, like Venn diagrams. The square represents the text. The circle represents a student’s dialogue with the text. Students see from the diagram that part of their responsive writings stays within the borders of the text referring to specific points in the text yet quite a bit passes beyond the text, forming links to their own lives. What I have discovered is that during a discussion, the class covers all the major points of the essay, and if there is something that I think is important that has been left out, I simply add those missing links as my contribution to the discussion.

In addition, to creating a very lively classroom discussion, I discovered almost by accident a second very important benefit to “Dialoguing with a Text” and this takes us to the last part of my discussion. As teachers who assign research papers aren’t we generally disappointed when a student produces research that is dull, pointless and without a hint of passion, that is a hodgepodge of cut and pasted quotes and paraphrases from a variety of sources? Haven’t most of us struggled with the problem of helping students write coherent, meaningful papers? How often have we encouraged our students to write research papers that reflect their own thoughts and points of view? And how often have we been disappointed as students lose their personal voice and point of view within the medley of quoted sources. They are unable to find their voice, their own perspective, within a patchwork of quotations from the required “one reference, one book, and, at least, two to four journal articles.”

I now use two techniques that have helped me deal with this problem. I instruct students to choose research topics that have personal significance to them. For example, in a freshman writing class that deals with research, I might encourage a student whose father or mother has an illness like heart trouble or diabetes or a student whose friend has a learning disability or a substance abuse problem to pursue those interests as research topics. Following this advice, research becomes for the student not a blind academic routine to demonstrate writing competencies, but a true search for information that helps them solve real problems and make informed choices in their lives.

Secondly, when I realized how vibrant and alive my student's writing had become in their classroom exercises of "Dialoguing with a Text," I started to give an added method to the usual instruction about conducting research. In addition to the traditional research techniques of summarizing, paraphrasing, quoting, and documenting sources, I now tell them to create personal dialogues with the authors of the books and articles that they have collected on their research topics, to talk back to the sources, to do all the activities that they had been doing in class with primary text that we had been studying in our classroom work together: that is, to challenge the premises, to trace out the implication of ideas, to relate personal experiences and to keep their mind focused on finding answers to their personal questions.

To conclude, I have been excited and pleased with the results of this approach. The students now compose research that is objective yet personal, public yet private, well documented and interesting to read. My problem with the dull, impersonal research paper has been solved, or at least greatly improved, by a simple classroom reading and writing technique, a strategy that encourages students to take a more active part in their learning, to seek connections between their lives and the author's whom they study, a method that creates an attitude toward learning that invites students to become members of the academy, to lift up their voices and to participate in the conversations of a community of learners.

### **References**

- Berthoff, Ann. *Forming Thinking Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers Inc. 1989. Print.
- Eiseley, Loren. *All the Strange Hours*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975. Print.
- Elbow, Peter. *Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1998. Print