



When Literature Is Evangelical **Pedagogies of Passion**

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Abstract: This essay examines how to teach from a point of passion to engage students with narrative study in a manner that moves them beyond the preoccupation with the pragmatic applications of reading and writing. I discuss two key teaching activities that allow students to see literature as a scholarly discipline in its proper context as a very personal philosophical tenet: A. “The Read-In and Write-In”; and B. “Bring a Friend to Class Day.”

In this paper, based on a presentation I made at the 2010 Annual CIT (Center for the Improvement of Teaching) Conference held at UMass Boston, I will describe two activities that I use each semester in Expository Writing 101 at Bentley University. The two activities are almost totally unrelated, but the advantage of discussing them together is that they potentially shed light on certain beliefs I have about my subject, the advantages of teaching that subject with passion at the forefront, and the urgency of recognizing that one’s pedagogy must adapt when one’s field—and right now, I’m speaking of the field of literature in English—is endangered and in crisis.

Though journals, books, and conferences have exhaustively identified the problems I am alluding to here, the coherence of this discussion still merits and perhaps even compels a brief and very general review. Within the academy, the humanities in general and languages in particular, have

been endlessly handicapped by the various ways in which our work is discredited by the larger culture, for reasons so varied that they even begin to contradict one another. For instance, unlike medicine or the law, students sometimes disregard English professors because the field is not seen as challenging. They tend to believe that the study of literature involves just sitting around and talking about books and what they mean, which anyone can do. (“Those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach.”) On the other hand, these same scholars are discredited when their work becomes an internal theoretical dialogue, seen as a deliberate gesture of exclusion, a private and hyperintelligible and therefore unintelligible conversation among overeducated people with too much free time. And in the current economic climate, where everything expensive is expendable, there is an ongoing necessity to demonstrate one’s usefulness.

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Sadly, we live in a material culture, not a spiritual culture, and that materialism has a firm grasp on all social institutions including higher education. Contemplation, self-reflection, deep thought—these practices are seen as borderline irresponsible in a society where people have no homes, no food, no medical care. The fact that people are now literally screaming at one another at town hall meetings should be an opportunity for us to recognize that the study of language, texts and contexts, is needed more than ever.¹

Meanwhile, as we charge forward into the technological age, the question of whether or not books and newspapers will even exist in ten years gives a subliterate public further fallacious reasons for downsizing the babies with the bathwater in a variety of industries tied to “old fashioned” publication. My challenge, then, is to use the space of the classroom to share the reasons why books still matter to me personally, despite the fact that my relationship to them is “professional” in every sense. Presently, I will give an overview of the two teaching activities that are the subject of this paper before discussing the philosophies behind them.

¹ In his article “Town Halls Gone Wild,” Alex Isenstadt writes, “Screaming constituents, protesters dragged out by the cops, congressmen fearful for their safety—welcome to the new town-hall-style meeting, the once-staid forum that is rapidly turning into a house of horrors for members of Congress” (Politico). I would argue that the atmosphere in contemporary public fora has become apparently cacophonous for reasons that are likely a complex mixture of issues, including a fear of the new African American President, lingering liberal resentment towards the outgoing Bush administration, the appetite of 24-hour news channels for spectacles such as this, and the legitimate anxieties brought on by the multifold crises in the economy, the geographic climate, *inter alia*. The din is an obvious overreaction to the widespread feeling of being unheard, a feeling which people are surely less likely to have if their command of the language has been frequently reaffirmed through their educational experiences.

But the impulse behind both activities is to connect the professional to the personal through my own passion for language, a passion that I know can be taught because it was taught to me.

For Expository Writing 101 “Lab,” a double-length class (160 minutes twice weekly), I have designed an activity for which we use a couple of class meetings simply for reading and writing in silence.² Students at Bentley are placed in lab sections when they have been identified as needing more sustained instruction in reading and writing, based on test scores and other diagnostic instruments, giving us a unique opportunity to engage in what amounts to a monastic experience with this two-part activity. I also create a discussion board forum where, after completing the Read-In and the Write-In, the students post messages describing what they were reading or what they were writing, and how they felt about the experience.

The “Read-In and Write-In” exercise is designed to address the variety of issues related to the unproductive encroachment of technology onto the intellectual landscape. In the book *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age*, Maggie Jackson observes, “While undoubtedly the reasons for this state of affairs are myriad, what’s certain is that we can’t be a nation of reflective, analytic problem solvers while cultivating a culture of distraction” (18-19). My writing students and I spend a significant portion of the semester studying theoretical issues related to the importance of reading and writing in an engaged individual’s life and to the difficulty in the current culture of cultivating the level of concentration that advanced literacy requires. This two-part activity is designed first to introduce to students the experience of reading and writing in an atmosphere of sustained

² See Appendices 1 and 2 for assignment handout.

concentration; and second to turn reading and writing into an event—to create a feeling of extraordinary anticipation around it.

The students' feedback on the activity has been very largely positive, but even if it had not been, the fact that the students have had this experience means that in the future, the psychological intimidation of having to do it again might be reduced. It's like running a marathon: They did it once, so they now know that they can do it again.

The second activity that I use in my classes is almost self-explanatory: It is called "Bring a Friend to Class Day." For a chance to improve their grade, students are given the opportunity to invite a friend to a designated class meeting. The requirements are that the invited friend must complete that day's reading assignment, and then must take the same quiz that the regular students in the class are also taking. If the invited friend performs well on the quiz, then it counts toward the original student's grade. For one day, the new person becomes a member of the class. Of course, in order to get them there and to get them to do the work, the original student must explain to his or her friend why the event and the required preparation are worth their time. This is, essentially, an act of instruction.

Both of these activities are geared towards shifting the students' commitment level in regard to reading and writing because they have been raised in a culture that does little to reinforce these practices. Prior to the Read-In and Write-In, the expository writing students spend sustained time examining issues related to the potential crisis posed by a public that has profoundly undervalued literacy as a way of engaging with the world. It is a familiar cultural crisis derived from the relentless need for entertainment and technological stimulation; and while it is easy enough to offer a series of jeremiads in class about how much better civilization

was when it was more thoughtful and disciplined, mental exercise is no more infectious than physical exercise or a healthy diet—even well-intended students are not able to enact difficult practices in their lives until a taste for it, a commitment to it, and a history of success with it have all been cultivated.

We open the course with Toni Morrison's essay "The Dancing Mind," a lecture in which the author takes an ostensibly mundane anecdote, a graduate student learning to read without distraction, and enlarges it to a broader concept of reading as a practice of "intimate, sustained surrender to the company of my own mind while it touches another's mind" (Morrison 15). She describes it as the responsibility of those committed to the reading/writing life, while arguing that "the life of the book business is very, very serious. Its real life is about creating and producing and distributing knowledge—pleasant to read, difficult to read, harrowing to read, seductive to read ... but knowledge. It's about making it possible for the entitled as well as the dispossessed to experience one's own mind dancing, dancing with another's" (16). Her essay illustrates both the beauty and the political urgency of this ordinary activity.

And make no mistake, the teaching of writing is for me a highly political gesture—as political as it would be if I were advocating to someone why to cast a vote or why to sit in the front of a bus. Not only am I aware of the *racially* charged history of literacy in this country, and the seditious act that literary instruction of black people once represented; but more immediately, I am at times almost at a loss for how to address the fact that a child who enters kindergarten not having been read to is at a disadvantage that for many children is difficult to undo, and this is how intellectual class or caste systems become locked in place. More so than any other field, the effort to become an excellent reader or writer is a practice that is resistant

to personal ambition. People are proficient users of the language because they have been surrounded by proficient users, and because a climate has been cultivated around them where literacy has thrived. So in fifteen weeks, maybe the only thing that I can really hope to do is to give them a sense of what critical inquiry involves in relation to a text and, more importantly, why one ought to feel passionate about the opportunity to experience that inquiry.

In another text on my 101 syllabus titled "The Poet," Ralph Waldo Emerson treats the philosophical value of poetry (and, by extension, reading) as so sacred that one's entire existence is transformed by a meaningful encounter with a text: "Here we find ourselves, suddenly, not in a critical speculation, but in a holy place, and should go very warily and reverently" (Emerson). His way of describing the world of the text so mirrors how I would describe the classroom that on the "Read-In and Write-In" dates, I post those words on the classroom door, and students correctly infer that on those days, "reverence" is synonymous with meditative silence.

One of the most important aspects of the Read-In and Write-In activity is my own participation. I read alongside the students, I write alongside them, and I even confess to my own challenges with the assignment on the message board. This is one of the rare times when I as an instructor completed my own assignment. As Barbara Swaby once indicated in an education TV series titled *The Reading-Writing Connection*, "The love of reading is much better caught than taught—and you catch it from someone who loves to do it!" (Swaby). I feel that a crucial aspect of the pedagogy here is the sharing of the experience and the collapsing of the teacher/student divide. I confide my own challenges to them in my responses on the message board, but in my written comments and especially in my part of class discussion, I emphasize what I love about it. I strongly believe that the

most powerful aspect of the exercise is not the discussion of it, but the thing itself—the feeling of being in that silent room, sitting alongside colleagues and friends in perfect synergy.

Much of what I have said about the "Read-In and Write-In" activity can also be said for Bring a Friend to Class Day. The central lesson for students is the transition from disciple to apostle. The teacher/student divide collapses once again and they become peers, performing the same function that I am committed to performing. I consider this activity to be a capstone of sorts, a culmination of our work. It occurs in the last third of the semester, and the students get to see our ranks swell to almost twice their normal number. People sit on the floor if they have to, or bring in chairs from nearby rooms, but we never schedule the activity for a bigger room because the point is to create memories in *this* room. We crowd together here for a congregational experience. And if I gain any added enrollment for the next semester from these visiting students, so much the better. But I have had students bring friends from off campus, and I even had a student bring her father, who taught literature elsewhere.

That leads me to the personal note on which I wish to close: I try to give my students, especially in a foundational course like Expository Writing, the experience I got on my mother's knee. Herself an English teacher and a lover of reading, my mother provided a passionate example of a person devoted to the written word. My father, also an educator, continues to be a man with a rare penchant for being *animated* by books. When I think of them, I am often reminded of something that Toni Morrison said not about reading, but about raising children. She said that while it is the parents' impulse always to look at their children critically, to see that their hair is combed and their shirt is tucked in, children begin life looking into

their parents' faces wondering one thing only: *Do their eyes light up when I enter the room?* Remarkably, in a nonliterary discussion, Morrison offered me one of the most powerful lessons about teaching literature that I have ever gotten.

It is my job to respond to students' work critically and to help them train their own critical gaze in relation to published texts or their own works in progress. But when it comes to cultivating their passion for reading, the most important thing I can do is to teach what I deeply love, and to model for them a sense of the connectedness between epistemology and ontology. Put more simply, I don't just "do" this stuff: This is who I *am*. From the cradle, I have used reading as a way to understand and to connect to life. And by some sheer fortune, I get to spend a few hours per week explaining to these young women and men why reading matters. There is no way for a professor with limited access to their lives to provide those students with the same experience on the same scale that my parents gave me. But what I nonetheless try to offer them is an honest personal example of a person who has dedicated his life to books.

After all, for some of us, literature is evangelical.

APPENDIX 1: READ-IN HANDOUT

READ-IN—NOV. 3
WRITE-IN—TBA

Read-In Philosophy

This assignment is meant to lower the threshold of distraction and to strengthen your appreciation for reading and writing in an attentive way. We will spend one day on reading and one day on writing *in stillness and silence*.

Read-In Opportunities

You are allowed to bring any reading you want within the reasonable limits described below. If you have reading that you need to do for this or someone else's class, feel free to bring it. Feel free to read the newspaper, a magazine, or a trashy novel. (Comic books and graphic novels are allowed if they involve written dialogue.) You may read several little things, or you may stay with the same piece for the whole period. Just make sure that whatever you bring is long enough to occupy you for the full class period. I encourage you to use this activity to bring reading that you enjoy, especially if you often feel that you have no time to do such reading amid your academic schedule.

Read-In Rules

- This is neither a joke nor a filler activity. This is a graded assignment for which there are two possible scores, a 3 or a 0. You must adhere to all of the requirements to get the 3.
- You must arrive on time. Tardiness will result in a 0. If you miss class, you must schedule a makeup date outside of class time or else accept the 0.
- From the time you enter the classroom door (no matter how early

you arrive) until the time you leave, you are to conduct yourself in total silence. I cannot emphasize this point enough. Speech, whispering, giggling, and note passing are all totally disallowed except in the event of imminent physical danger to yourself or your colleagues. If it helps, think of yourself as part of a monastic order that has taken a vow of silence. A single disruption of the silence requirement will result in a 0.

- Whatever you bring to read should involve complete sentences. If you bring a textbook, it should primarily involve words instead of numbers. If you speak another language and want to read in that language, that is allowed.
- Your choice of reading should be respectful of your colleagues.
- The only writing that is allowed is textual annotation.
- Your reading must be done on paper. No laptops are allowed at any time for any reason.
- Cell phones are to be turned off and kept off. A ringing cell phone will result in a 0.
- There will be no break during this class. We will begin at 3:35 and end at 6:15. If you think you might get hungry, you may bring a snack to class, provided you can eat it quietly while maintaining appropriate attention to your reading. If you need to use the restroom, you may excuse yourself for that at any point, but you are expected to return to class immediately without pausing to check email or to converse with anyone, in person or by phone. If you encounter someone in the hall, politely tell them that you are due back in class.

A separate sheet with the Write-In Rules will be distributed after the Read-In.

APPENDIX 2: WRITE-IN HANDOUT

WRITE-IN—NOV. 19

Write-In Philosophy

This assignment is meant to lower the threshold of distraction and to strengthen your appreciation for reading and writing in an attentive way. We will spend one day writing *in stillness and silence*.

Write-In Opportunities

You are allowed to bring any writing you want within the reasonable limits described below. If you have writing that you need to do for this or someone else's class, feel free to work on it. Feel free to write personal letters, business letters, poems, personal essays, substantial notes inside greeting cards (not the constant reiteration of a holiday platitude), or a diary entry. You may write several little things, or you may stay with the same piece for the whole period. Just make sure that whatever you bring is long enough to occupy you for the full class period. I encourage you to use this activity to bring writing that you enjoy, especially if you often feel that you have no time to do such writing amid your academic schedule.

Write-In Rules

- This is neither a joke nor a filler activity. This is a graded assignment for which there are two possible scores, a 3 or a 0. You must adhere to all of the requirements to get the 3.
- You must arrive on time. Tardiness will result in a 0. If you miss class, you must schedule a makeup date outside of class time or else accept the 0.
- From the time you enter the classroom door (no matter how early

you arrive) until the time you leave, you are to conduct yourself in total silence. I cannot emphasize this point enough. Speech, whispering, giggling, and note passing are all totally disallowed except in the event of imminent physical danger to yourself or your colleagues. If it helps, think of yourself as part of a monastic order that has taken a vow of silence. A single disruption of the silence requirement will result in a 0.

- Whatever you bring to write should involve the composition of complete prose sentences or poetic lines. You are not allowed to do numerical homework during this time, nor are you allowed to complete assignments for another class that cannot reasonably be considered to contribute to the goal of immersion in writing. If you speak another language and want to write in that language, that is allowed.
- Any *reading* that you do during this hour should involve either the revision of a draft or the re-reading of a text that is the analytical subject of the composition you are working on; and any reading should involve active annotation. This activity is meant to emphasize the later writing stages of drafting and revising over the early stages of collecting and connecting. (See Five Stages of Writing notes.) You must begin the Write-In activity with enough familiarity with your source text not to spend prolonged time away from active drafting or revising. Your choice of writing should be respectful of your colleagues.
- Your writing must be done on paper. No laptops are allowed at any time for any reason.
- Cell phones and iPods are to be turned off and kept off.
- There will be no break during this class. We will begin at 3:35 and end at 6:15. If you think you might get

hungry, you may bring a snack to class, provided you can eat it quietly while maintaining appropriate attention to your writing. If you need to use the restroom, you may excuse yourself for that at any point, but you are expected to return to class immediately without pausing to check email or to converse with anyone, in person or by phone. If you encounter someone in the hall, politely tell them that you are due back in class.

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