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Over-Reading, Overreading, Over Reading: Implications for Teaching and Learning

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History: Towards A Special Issue

Long before this special issue came into being, we (the present guest editors) were having the usual teacherly discussions about successes and failures in the classroom. For us, "the classroom," at the time happened to be composition and literature classes at the University of Florida. We returned many times to thinking about the charge that students leveled against us (and other colleagues, it turned out) on what seemed like a pretty regular basis (once or twice a semester): "aren't we reading too much into this?"

What did this question ultimately mean? Where was it coming from and why was it being formulated by particular students at particular moments?

We asked whether students were just not "getting it" (whatever "it" was). This conclusion chalked the "over-reading" question up to mere contingency, to fluke, to the unavoidablilities of teaching (i.e., a student has a bad day and gets frustrated in class for largely external reasons). Leaving the issue untheorized, however, was simply not satisfying, nor did it seem-then or now-ethical.

Were we bad teachers? We held out this possibility only on the worst days. It became clear, though, as we talked with other teachers about whether their students also, on occasion, claimed that reading had become "over-reading," that it was not a phenomenon limited to our particular classes, nor even to our general areas of study and teaching. The "over-reading" claim was one that was apparently showing up in diverse circumstances.

Actually, having students feel like we (or they) were "over-reading" was perhaps marking a significant pedagogical moment. Far from signaling "bad teaching," could it have actually been a sign that students were doing something substantially outside of their comfort zones, and thus potentially growing as reader, writers, and thinkers? The potential for these specific classroom moments to have implications for the much larger goals that teachers and institutions often profess-like encouraging critical and creative thinking-was becoming very real.

Ultimately, we had to acknowledge that this "over-reading problem," this resistance offered by students, kept happening. It was never so debilitating as to make teaching impossible, and certainly it was never overtly mean-spirited. But it was, if nothing else, persistent. And though we had generated informal discussion on the subject among ourselves, colleagues who taught at the University of Florida, and friends who taught elsewhere, it did seem that there was no substantial body of professional, public discussion on the subject.

A Question for all Educators?

We found ourselves at various different times in the humanities library, the science library, and the education library, pulling books off the shelf on elementary reading, developmental writing, the politics of interpretation, the history of rhetoric, the history of composition, the history of rhetoric and composition, reading and sense, reading and nonsense, and numerous volumes on curriculum development and on assessment.

What we discovered was a curious case of both absence and abundance. All of these works grazed the kind of volume we were hoping to find but never did find, and began to suggest that the idea of over-reading, at least as we had provisionally formulated it and as we were trying to approach it, was functioning like a "node": a point that did not have an area of its own, but that was marking the intersection of many, and sometimes very diverse, intellectual fields (from the immediately practical to the highly theoretical).

So was "over-reading" going by a different name, or names? If this was the case, we wanted to know what those other names were. From what fields of study did they emerge, and how might we consider these alternate possibilities in light of one another?

Beyond discussions in the office, at the gym, or at the local pub, the first chance we had to think publicly about this charge of "over-reading" was the 2001 Blue Ridge International Conference on the Humanities and the Arts (BRICHA), for which we organized a panel on the topic of over-reading. This conference, which featured a broad and diverse group of participants, seemed an ideal place to begin to generate discussion on a topic we felt that many educators could identify with, but about which few (if any) seemed to have had the opportunity to talk in any organized way.

What came from the conference papers we prepared for the 2001 BRICHA was a set of further questions, beyond the ones we were already asking, that would ultimately become the substance for our 2002 BRICHA panel ("Over-Reading II: Implications for Teaching in the Humanities") (1). At the same time that we prepared for the second conference, which represented a further attempt to initiate broader professional discussion of this "idea of over-reading" as it then stood, we were also beginning to develop the special issue of *inventio* which you are now reading.

inventio seemed an ideal choice for such an issue given its mandate to reach a broad range of educators and to be a source for "creative thinking about learning and teaching." It is ultimately this focus on both learning and teaching (suggesting equal attention to the *student*, as well as to the *teacher* end of things) that makes *inventio* such an excellent forum in which to think about "over-reading" (as we've come to understand it) as a problem/possibility that involves both students and teachers.

Uncanny Parallels

What emerges from the articles collected here is that sense of the diversity of issues at stake in terms of "over-reading" that we had been sensing even in our earliest informal discussion on the subject: issues involving the ways in which students and teachers relate to one another on an individual basis in the physical and the virtual classrooms.

Similarly important is the degree to which students and teachers relate to one another in the larger context of institutional and cultural traditions. Teachers carry on, and often rework, traditions of teaching that involve assessment and curricular pressures, not to mention institutional pressures from departmental on up to college-wide levels.

And students attempt to navigate themselves successfully through a single class while at the same time inventing a relationship (or many relationships) between themselves and the larger institution that they are a part of, confronting, just as teachers do, pressures from departmental to college-wide levels. The implications on both the teaching and learning ends of the educational spectrum are clear.

Indeed, our initial interest in the topic was motivated in part by the fact that we could remember back to our own undergraduate days when we felt in our English classes that

professors were "reading too much into" a given text. The continuity we were seeing from our time as students to our time as teachers was uncanny.

Definitions: Coming to Terms

Having provided a brief history of the emergence of this journal issue itself, a history in which we've used the phrase "over-reading" as though it were a stable and consistent "thing," it is certainly time to consider just how multidimensional the term itself really is. The articles collected here reflect a diversity of perspectives and teaching situations, not to mention a broad range of theoretical and practical possibilities.

The diversity was pleasantly surprising. Our call for papers suggested some possibilities:

- "over-reading" strategically defined

  over-reading as real and imagined phenomenon
- over-reading as a specific moment in the classroom: what next?
- intersections between over-reading and other fields of inquiry, including post-structuralist theory, composition pedagogy, reading theory, and cultural studies
- over-reading and new media teaching
- possibilities beyond the classroom
- over-reading as transgression

The title of the issue is meant to capture some of this multi-dimensionality: "Over-Reading, Overreading, Over Reading." The repetition suggests the necessary kinds of overlap that many of the articles here show; they are clearly connected with one another, speaking to many of the same general concerns. The possibilities latent in the various (mis)spellings of the title (and others that have shown up along the way) point to just some of the broader issues that we have faced in developing the topic and that are reflected in the articles

Should it be "over-reading," suggesting a term that stands on its own, but perhaps without the weight of a tradition yet behind it? Hyphenated as though to suggest that it is still in some moment of becoming, still a contest between how the terms that the hyphen brings together will ultimately function. Should it be "overreading," a more finalized term, fully worked out, defined, and ready to emerge in discussion and print? Or should the one term really be left as two: "over reading." A kind of experiment waiting to happen: chemicals yet

unmixed. (Harun Thomas, in his article "Teaching Tupac," raises the very interesting possibility that "over" is an equally unstable term, as important and rich in meaning as "reading" itself. Students might feel they are "over" reading, as one would get "over" a cold.)

As it happens, we've employed each of these versions, and probably many others. Retaining this instability in our title has worked well to reflect the kinds of possibilities being worked through by the various authors collected in the special issue. Each clearly is speaking to a related set of concerns, and yet there is still diversity in approach, in theoretical and practical focus, and in the ways in which each author, in the very process of writing a paper on "over-reading," has had to negotiate just what that term can mean, what the implications are for teaching, and what the implications are for learning (2).

Interpreting Indeterminacy

What happens when students accuse teachers of interpretations that strain student credibility? Popular representations of "the professor" stress the arcane and improbable viewpoints of the overeducated. Martin Wallace addresses this question in "Over-Reading and the Shaky Authority of the English Professor Wallace is concerned with the position of the English professor within the classroom, and how this reflects the position of the professor in the culture at large. Thus, student resistance to the methods of interpretation that we teach stems from cultural resistance to "academia," that sector of the economy that doesn't appear to boost either growth or revenues.

Questions of interpretation are closely linked to the conditions surrounding interpretation. Our concern with interpretation in the classroom is certainly not new. Poststructuralism, the new readers: these are viewpoints built from the initial recognition that indeterminacy is a component built into language. In the classroom, whether we like to or not, we occupy a position similar to that documented by Stanley Fish in *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*.

Fish identifies at least two interpretive possibilities available to the phrase "Is there a text in this class?" One is concerned entirely with the material existence of a textbook: is there a text required for this class, accompanied by the implicit questions if so, what is it and where

can I find it? The second question, only capable of being posed by a member of the category "one of Fish's victims" involves indeterminacy and textual production.

Fish's argument stems from his postulation of interpretive communities. The possibilities available to a single interpretive community are guided by the context of that community. For Fish, the interpretive community enables meaning through a structure which "is not abstract and independent but social" (318). The social structure of the classroom, then, serves as a microcosm of the university as a whole.

However, a great number of variables prevent each classroom from being the same. All composition and literature courses have the goal of helping students to improve their reading and writing skills. But there is no single approach that guarantees mastery of the material. Likewise, there is no criteria that documents the types of reading and writing which students are to learn.

Such a community is, then, in a constant process of change. Fish notes that:

> *It is not a single structure with a privileged relationship to the process of communication as it occurs in any situation but a structure that changes when one situation with its assumed background of practices, purposes, and goals, has given way to another* (318).

Fish's comment here could apply to a wide number of scenarios, ranging in scope from the encounter between student and colleague that inaugurates Fish's essay to, for example, the changing political valuation of words like "peace" and "war" in George Orwell's *1984*.

Over-reading and the Quotidian

The concept of over-reading opens discussion on this process of change. Student reading practices transcend classroom boundaries. Indeed, as Norman Holland notes in *Poems in Persons: An Introduction to the Psychoanalysis of Literature*:

> *a reader uses the fine, subtle listening that 'new' critics have taught these last decades to listen to himself and to others with the same attention to detail and nuance that formerly was reserved for literature as a separate entity* (134).

The process of interpretation, which in current practice clearly extends the boundaries of the text, is never far removed from the social sphere.

While Edward Said faults criticism as:

> *an academic thing, located for the most part far away from the questions that trouble the reader of a daily newspaper* (613)

many instructors follow his call for a criticism that directly engages the political. Our choice of texts and topics for analysis reveals our interpretation of our goals as instructors. Language and images that we produce and consume determine the ideologies governing a given culture.

As Adrian Blackledge and Aneta Pavlenko note in their introduction to a special issue of Multilingua devoted to language and interpretation:

> *language ideologies are positioned in, and subject to, their social, political, and historical contexts. Nor are language ideologies fixed, stable, or immutable. They are multiple, and influenced by changes at local, national, state and global levels* (122).

Such language ideologies underlie and inform textual meaning. Furthermore, our analysis of language ideologies leads to an unmasking of their political implications. In many cases, we teach in universities and colleges precisely because our profession allows us to effect real change: the texts we select, our approaches to these texts, even our teaching persona reflect our attempts to maximize our impact on students. This is true whether we are teaching literature, or teaching students to use rhetorical skills in order to interpret as texts elements of their daily existence which they would (perhaps) otherwise accept and internalize without question.

Flexible Discourse

The essays in this issue detail a wide variety of teaching strategies and practices. Above all, they demonstrate an awareness of the flexible nature of textual discourse. More and more, teachers of language rely on texts which may or may not be immediately recognizable as literary. For Glenn F. Stillar, the term text denotes:

> *the record of discoursal processes involving, but not limited to, language systems. It can occur in a written or spoken (often transcribed for analysis) mode. Text instantiates the phonological and/or graphological, lexical and syntactic, and semantic resources of a language. It also instantiates other resources for making linguistic*

> *messages, such as generic conventions and expectations [...] and other community expectations for the forms and functions of particular discourse types* (Stillar 11).

Stillar's project, unraveling the semiotic significance of materials ranging from a student's note to contemporary advertisements, finds meaning that is concealed by the techniques of textual form. Such texts offer an opportunity for analysis of issues that may otherwise be invisible to students. By this, we mean that, while students may be quite familiar with the surface of such texts, they may be unfamiliar with the discoursal processes that constitute these texts. Stillar points out that "texts exhibit some kind of unity or texture that enables them to be (socially) recognizable as a whole" (Stillar 11). This quality often obscures the various components that combine to produce such unity.

Over-reading and the Politics of the Classroom

Suzanne Scott's "Over-Reading Reaches the Margins" comments on the interconnections of images and language, helping students to analyze the components that produce the illusion of textual unity. Texts and images selected by the instructor allow for a dialogue on social marginalization that is not always as self-evident to students as it is to instructors. This can be particularly significant given Pierre Bordieu's assertion of the symbolic power of these materials:

> *symbolic power is that invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it* (Bordieu 164).

Scott argues that any text interrogating gender or sexuality is subject to some level of student criticism. Rather than overlook such texts, Scott concludes, educators must move away from master narratives precisely because of the challenging nature of texts and images that present the Other. Politically, student under-reading is dangerous in that it allows students to normalize conservative ideologies while discounting the importance of critical, often termed "radical," analysis.

Like Suzanne Scott, Jens Erik Gould is concerned with the political implications of teaching practices. As an English language teacher at the Universiteit Gent, Belgium, he discusses the extent to which language learning and interpretation are interconnected. In "An

Alternative to Over-Teaching: A Teacher-peripheral Approach and the Internalization of Language through Political Discourse," he responds to current articles in the media detailing the so-called Euro-American rift through a discussion of his students' reaction to the English language as a political construct and an economic tool.

Approaching the politics of the classroom from a different angle, Harun Karim Thomas, in "Teaching Tupac Shakur in the English Classroom: What is the Game?" situates his discussion of over-reading in the context of teaching popular culture. He further considers relevant issues within the humanities (and the university at large) in terms of the canon and its (re)formation and the possibilities for change within the university.

Thomas explores the intriguing possibility that the "charge" of over-reading is an act bound up in the language of exchange, specifically the language of "credit." He concludes that over-reading, as a pedagogical tool, might be a "necessary and political requisite for assuming responsibility and obligation."

The Reality of Exchange

Over-reading as we define it is indeed a process of teacher/student *exchange*. We can refine our teaching practices in order to maximize the pedagogical significance of these moments. At the moment of over-reading, we are forced to synthesize the various philosophical and linguistic positions we have assumed in the course of our graduate training and professional development in order to resolve a potential crisis in the classroom.

Our reading and training enable a wealth of responses to a student's allegation of over-reading. On the one hand, we have been trained to encourage the open inquiries made by young critical minds. We could use this charge of over-reading as a prompt to arrive at these very issues within the text we have been accused of over-reading. Our metadiegetic reflection on the apparently contradictory and divergent viewpoints enabled by a single text, or even, for the most skillful teacher and attentive class, of a single line, point to the relevancy of questioning interpretation. To question the impulse to interpret, we could conclude as amazed and thoughtful students copiously scribble notes, is to arrive at the divergent possibilities which produce a dialectic that furthers our understanding of the text. Or, annoyed by the presumptuous vacuity of students today, we point to political upheavals, social crises,

environmental catastrophes enabled by this self same inability to arrive at meaning through a rigorous process of critical inquiry.

Or there is another possibility: suppose we are the ones who accuse our students of over-reading? For those of us who have endured class after class of stoic student silence, perhaps this possibility appears the least likely. However, we have also had to accommodate viewpoints that sound wrong, that jolt our own notions of what a particular text can do.

At that moment, faced with this kind of viewpoint, we do not have the time to contemplate the philosophical implications of the teacher/ student dialectic engendered by such an exchange. If we merely negate such a viewpoint, we become guilty of perpetuating the hierarchical transmission of knowledge so characteristic of the autocratic teacher-centered classroom and so clearly antithetical to the pedagogical philosophies guiding our own training.

The Teachable Moment

Several of the essays in this issue contend with over-reading as a specific moment in the classroom. Deborah A. Sarbin's "Re-Inventing the University: Student Over-Reading as Apprentice Over-Reaching" focuses on specific student readings in relation to David Bartholomae's concept of the invention of the university. She begins from the supposition that, more often than not, both students and instructors are guilty of under-reading. In one sense, classes do not adequately explore texts. Also, instructors do not pay enough attention to the position of the student encountering literature and the rules that accompany interpretation.

Instead of discounting over-readings, even those particularly difficult interpretations that make instructors "cringe," Sarbin argues for their pedagogical usefulness. She urges instructors to recognize the risks students take when offering interpretations. Above all, she stresses that instructors can learn from over-reading.

This recognition that students and teachers are engaged in a process of interpretation also figures prominently in Sharon D. Robinson's "Using Computer-Mediated Communication to Enhance In-Class Discussions and Comprehension in Undergraduate Literature Classes." In this article, Robinson uses an example from a foreign language literature class that can be applied to a wide variety of courses. She discusses the impact of new media on the range and scope of

student discussion. Online discussions allow students to explore readings more freely. Robinson concludes that, in this environment, students do not feel implicated by their readings.

In "Divide to Conquer: Limiting the Goals of College Composition Courses," Edgar Eslava explores a different dimension of teaching and interpretation. In this essay, he is concerned with the preponderance of theoretical positions available to the instructor. Our awareness of many competing, even contradictory, theoretical approaches to the practical tasks of teaching can, Eslava argues, cripple our effectiveness as teachers (we can actually "over-read" pedagogical possibilities and assume that each and every one must be accommodated in each and every class).

He recommends against teaching every class through an indeterminate medley of teaching theories. Instead, he suggests, instructors should employ different strategies at different times without feeling compelled to be all inclusive, thereby developing a self-aware relationship to pedagogical theories that Eslava believes is currently lacking in the academy.

We can often simply justify discarding a problematic student interpretation based on the text itself. The text does not allow for such a reading, we may say. At such a moment, we assert our professional mastery of the language of interpretation: we mystify and reassert our authority through reference to connotation, denotation, the ironic interplay of elements, that structures the text. But, at the same time, we may also be responding quite directly to interpretations that undermine the philosophical and political positions underlying our own teaching.

Tracy Johnson develops the relationship between classroom practices and literary theory as it is presented in the popular media. Like Wallace, Johnson is concerned with the tension between literary theory and "common culture." In "Linking the Classroom to the World: Teaching Literary Theory in the UK," she contends that popular novels can help students to understand the issues presented in literary theory: a merging of the two can help students to realize the significance of critical interpretation.

Further Possibilities

The articles collected here represent an initial foray into a landscape of very difficult, but crucially important questions. What implications does over-reading have beyond the

classroom? How is over-reading related to issues of class, gender, and classroom equity? Can it be made to function as a positive force in the classroom? Perhaps over-reading, especially as a practice that educators may have to provoke (or "force") students towards, in fact gives us access to problems of gender, class, social equality and democratic agency, that may otherwise not arise as we examine ideas and texts in the classroom. What does this mean for students and for educators?

It is precisely because we cannot thoroughly answer this question, or the many that stem from it, that we felt a special issue devoted to over-reading was necessary. It is at this cultural moment, when higher education is facing budgetary cutbacks, coupled with the increasing tendency towards the corporatization and the vocationalization of colleges and universities, that we as educators need to be intensely thoughtful about how and why we educate. For those trying to foster the skills of creative and critical thinking, over-reading is an important phenomenon that cannot be ignored.

References

Notes

1. We also explored over-reading in relation to the urban environment in "Recursivity: Navigating Composition and Space," an essay that appears in Agora (http://www.humanities.ualberta.ca/agora/). This essay details a series of assignments that highlight the textual qualities of the built environment. The essay begins from the supposition that the recursivity of the writing process is closely related to the recursive process by which the pedestrian navigates the built environment. The pedestrian/writer parallel figures heavily into a set of assignments described in the essay. These assignments, which address the political and environmental consequences of the American auto-suburb, help students to examine the extent to which the shape of the city is itself an argument that continuously asserts ideological claims.
2. To some extent we've standardized to "over-reading" for the purposes of publication; this formulation seems a good midpoint between the unhyphenated and divided "over reading" and the unhyphenated and joined "overreading."

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