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Disciplinary Envy - or - Learning to Read

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Am I the only one who didn't learn to read until graduate school, or possibly until I started teaching?

A convergence of things brought me to this realization. My current institution's most recent alumni magazine included a feature on our New Media Studies program. It started only two years ago and, with only one new faculty hire - an impossibly hip young scholar from the East Coast - it is now among our biggest majors (about six times the size of religious studies). NMS students get to do all sorts of cool stuff like make movies, analyze visual media, crunch data, play with computers and 3D printers, work in their own production company, and just generally be relevant.



While this little bit of disciplinary envy was percolating, I went to teach my majors and minors seminar, "Theory and Method in the Study of Religion," a three-hour yawn fest in which I afflict students with jargon-filled texts. Judging from their faces, it is every bit as excruciating as it sounds. This week's torture implement was a book that utterly blew my mind in grad school, but when I used the word "fun" as we began our discussion, the students actually laughed at me. Fun, it seems, was not how they would have described it.



And how could I blame them? When I think back to my own senior seminar, I remember dutifully spending hours reading a book each week, underlining things that seemed important, and still feeling I had learned next to nothing. I somehow made it through seminary the same way: I read, I picked up a few ideas here and there, but most of what I learned

came from never skipping class and hanging on every word of my professors.

As it turns out, the concept I was still missing was “argument.” In my PhD program this became a real liability, and I am grateful I had an advisor who no longer let me get away with it. “Don’t be nice to these people,” he said after reading some bland summary I had written. For the first time I began to see that authors had axes to grind, that they had explicit and implicit conversation partners, and that my job as a reader was to decipher how they fit into various ongoing arguments.

But it wasn’t until I started teaching that I finally felt I could read. Being suddenly responsible for knowing what was going on and helping others understand forced me, or perhaps allowed me, to engage texts more fully than I ever had before. All it took was four years of college, a three-year master’s degree, and five years of grad school to get me there.

Which brings me back to my disciplinary envy. Scholarly monographs are decidedly old media, and even religious studies is moving away from our old obsession with texts. In our current climate, it is difficult to persuade students that deep, difficult reading is worth their time. Moreover, the virtue of slow, careful argument is decidedly scorned in popular culture. (Did I mention the NMS students get to make movies?)



And yet, the purpose of a liberal arts education – besides an enhanced ability to read, write, and articulate – is to shape lawyers and health care workers and businesspeople and parents and television producers who *see differently* than most folks. If some of us don’t keep teaching the boring-yet-occasionally-mind-blowing stuff, who will? Perhaps I am merely justifying my own existence, but isn’t it someone’s job, as part of a diverse academic eco-system, to keep the old media alive?

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