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Pedagogy

THE PRACTICE OF READING GOOD BOOKS

A PLEA TO TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

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This article is designed to provoke lively discussion between and among teachers and students regarding the growing state of reading atrophy. It best serves as an "inspirational" beginning piece for undergraduate humanities or social science courses that contain difficult, "primary source," readings. The article consists of two main parts. The first addresses contemporary sources of reading atrophy. The second part offers arguments for why the practice of reading difficult books is worth the effort.

What I mean by reading is not skimming, not being able to say as the world saith, 'Oh yes, I've read that!' but reading again and again, in all sorts of moods, with an increase of delight every time, till the thing read has become a part of your system and goes forth along with you to meet any new experience you may have.
— C. E. Montague

ON READING ATROPHY

Mark Twain, in characteristic wit, once wrote, "the man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who cannot read them" (cited in Barzun, 1991, p. 115). What practical insight. And who can deny that today's college stu-

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dents have easy access to good books.[1] But we should not draw the quick conclusion that today's students take advantage by reading more good books than ever. On the contrary, increasing numbers of students do not read good books, and, perhaps just as many, at least by their own estimates, cannot read them.[2] The overall point is that the covers of countless good books stand as doors neglected and unopened, their enclosed worlds perhaps forever forgotten. The consequences of such negligence may be impossible to anticipate fully, but for now, we can identify conditions that, directly or indirectly, feed the general state of reading atrophy.

Obviously, reading is not disappearing wholesale. In fact, there appears to be as much reading as ever before. Publishing still runs high (including magazines, newspapers, tabloids, and electronic pages). People read memos and mailings, messages on product packaging and on television screens, computer texts, and e-mail. Reading remains, and some sorts of reading are even on the rise, so what is the big deal? The big deal is the atrophy and loss of a particular kind of reading.

Consider times when we engage in what could be called "easy reading" or simply "looking at information." Such activities are characterized by quick glances over familiar words and syntax. Easy reading means we access instant information, and immediate consumability—whether by the consummate reader or the semi-literate—is the measure of message clarity. This can be set in contrast with what might be called "difficult reading" or "serious study." Difficult reading takes time. Readers encounter unknown words, familiar words used in unfamiliar ways, as well as long and complex syntactical structures. "Information," if this is delivered over in difficult reading, must be ruminated upon and hence is obtained only gradually. Because students can be deeply misinformed about the demands of difficult reading (or are simply unwilling to make the needed effort), they may assume that all reading should be easy reading. Difficult reading, scorned for not being instantly consumable, is thereby defined out of the picture, and thus, many good books are avoided altogether.

A little experiment might help here: Ask colleagues how comfortably they test students over assigned readings not discussed in class. Most, I suspect, feel a little uncomfortable, and many who are comfortable gain much of their comfort by assigning "user-friendly" textbooks. Now, ask students how many courses, if good notes were taken during each class session, they still could earn a "B" in without doing any of the reading. How many will suggest that this is possible in a fair number of courses? Questions along these lines reveal that some instructors, perhaps more than a few, do not rely on students' abilities to read. Students pick-up on this and use it to their disadvantage. If only occasionally, haven't we all heard students say they didn't do the assigned reading because it was too difficult to understand? Knowing ahead of time that they later can use that explanation, some students may do just enough cursory glancing at the reading to be able to demonstrate their confusion over it. The underlying logic here is that it is more socially acceptable to be incompetent than to be lazy. There is more social utility in saying that one is unable to read than in saying that one did not, genuinely, try to read it. What could explain this? If students have bought into psychological notions of "mind," or "intelligence," or "intellectual capacities," they may believe that intelligence cannot be cultivated in the same way that industriousness can. Society holds people responsible for sloth and indolence, but ignorance and intellectual incompetence are relieved of moral weight because these are taken to be genetic and somehow beyond an individual's control. This is not to deny that some students sincerely offer the lament: "I didn't understand the reading," but not all laments are so sincere.

And, maybe teachers should be uncomfortable testing students over readings not discussed in class. Talk about what has been read is an essential part of reading. Reading is not reducible to a psychological activity. It resists such confinements, such temporal and spatial restrictions. As the works of Derrida, Ong, and others point out, texts are not bound, self-contained objects. They hold crossroads, intersections of indefinite numbers of "traces," and implicitly hold eternally deferred boundaries. Moreover, what Sven Birkerts (1994) in his *Gutenberg Elegies* calls "the shadow life of reading," is more like the perennial environment where reading's progeny live. In practice this means students should read assigned readings, participate in class discussion, and then *read again*. They should not demand immediate comprehension for themselves nor immediate comprehensibility of the readings. On the contrary, they must learn to suspend their desire for immediate grasp and to read on anyway. Then, after a second or third reading and after having discussed the reading with others who also have read (and maybe after reading some other relevant texts), they can expect to be ready to begin.

Of the countless good books which could be said to be too difficult to read, consider this question. Imagine students are offered $1,000 if they can correctly answer 7 out of 10 questions over the reading. Under such conditions how many now could read a little better than before? Granted, concert pianists are not made overnight, and one cannot, even with the largest cash incentives, instantly become a great reader. Still, great readers must be willing to practice, and practice requires effort and patience. But if, as Lee Thayer would say, "Most people prefer problems they 'just can't solve' to solutions that they 'just don't like,'" then an adequate corrective isn't likely to be forthcoming any time soon.

Many if not all students could practice their reading more thoroughly. And, many if not all also could read before as well as after class discussion. But too many, maybe even most, seem to think that such rigorous reading and re-reading is not worth the effort.

NOT WORTH THE EFFORT

The common-sense notion of "not being worth the effort" gets at the very heart of the growing state of reading atrophy. For starters, difficult reading may seem not worth the effort when compared to the little effort required by other communicative media. The average college student has continuous instantaneous access to prepackaged and readily grasped information through television, radio, and the Internet. The ease and availability of these other media directly feed reading atrophy. The evidence here is so abundant and overlyapparent, so widely recognized and frequently talked about that we need to safeguard against attending to these factors to the exclusion of others.

"We are so built," Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1950) tells us, "that our appetites are the outcome of the foods we eat." Rather than walk around the library stacks, many students now use search-engines from home computers to access only that information which is available on-line. Any text recognized as not instantly consumable can be abandoned quickly; more readily and easily obtained information is only a click away. A steady diet of mass media (TV, Internet, and perhaps a few textbooks) means that some students rarely, if ever, come into physical contact with good books. Those who have may not have taken the needed time nor required effort to encounter the great ideas available therein. If a good book never has registered deeply with students, they might not even suspect their nascent capacities to read. Given that so few of today's students seriously ruminate over challenging texts, most deeply underestimate their ability to grow in reading skill and comprehension. They fail to realize how cultivatable are their capacities for expression and comprehension.

Beliefs cannot grow where they purchase no ground and receive no nourishment. The context today is impatience. David Shenk (1999) well speaks to the contemporary culture where he observes, "What if I told you that there's no such thing as a fast modem, and there never will be? That's because quickness has disappeared from our culture. We now only experience degrees of slowness" (p. 41). Some illustrations may help to clarify this point. In class, I sometimes ask my students if they ever listen to a song or a CD more than once. Students always look at me so shocked. How could I ask such a stupid question? They all know that they listen to these things again and again. What most of them usually fail to grasp, however, is that some people read that way. I also like to ask them if, when they listen to their favorite songs, they listen to arrive at the end of them. If they don't listen to a song to get to its end, then, my question was and still is, can we learn to recover reading in that way? "Apparently not," seems to be the contemporary response. Our world is hyper-rapid and ever changing.[3] Not surprisingly, we live, regardless of any progress, in an unprecedented state of impatience. Student comments on reading exemplify and verify this sensibility. They say, "Why can't the authors just get to the point? Couldn't the point be made more simply?" What is this "point" which students commonly seek? If it is an adequate test question response, or worse, a sentence with sound-byte quality, then the difficulties of getting students to read good books are great indeed.

The marks of reading atrophy also appear when students read aloud in class. More than nervously rushing through, many speed along so as to have it read, to get the point said. Their hurried pace reflects a kind of scanning for information. It is obvious that they don't think of a text as a place to dwell or as a shaping stone against which to forge themselves. Most students, perhaps most people in the society at large, impatiently take information to be a thing, some kind of stuff delivered over or added to their "knowledge base." They think of reading only as a *means* to an end of information and not as an end in itself. Perhaps they assume their minds are like computers and it makes no sense to speak of a computer rereading a text. Such faulty notions of mind and information are also a source of ready atrophy. Students too quickly assume that their minds are container-things and that information is a kind of substance which is transmitted from one person to another by way of language. They may think of ideas as transportable objects and language as a kind of "conduit" for the social distribution of personal ideas (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Rather than understanding themselves as creatures able to grow in abilities for expression and comprehension, they stop short and merely seek information.

Impatience also provides common sense with the notion of an "average reader." Employing such a notion for comparison, students quickly and easily take a self-defeatist position. They say, "I read slower than other people. Reading is hard for me." Whether any given person is or is not a "slow" reader is not the point. What is more interesting is the high number of people who make this claim. Going only by students' self-expressions we could conclude, logic not-withstanding, that most people read more slowly than other people. It also is interesting how we all too commonly assume that slow reading is an intellectual deficit, or at the least, not how one is supposed to read. Shouldn't we, by practical contrast, congratulate and commend those persons who have developed the competence to be slow readers?

But not all students hurry through their readings. Some can sense their unreadiness to begin yet don't understand that no one begins ready, and so, they fail to begin at all. They think they don't *have* to do the readings. Many will pass tests and courses—and some may do well without reading—from which students may infer that this demonstrates their intelligence. Some students may even skip readings altogether in a misguided attempt to produce evidence of how "smart" they are. In his essay "A Poetic for Communication," Lee Thayer (1997) addresses the subtle individualism which lends intelligibility to these actions. He writes, "And that's why people may say, 'I want to be a writer,' but not, 'I want to be a reader' . . . Learning how to 'be' a reader is no less demanding than learning how to 'be' a writer; it is just less romantic" (p. 79). The romantic faith in individualism is the root of many students' assumptions about reading (and perhaps of just about everything) that "everyone has their own interpretation." If this is the case, the logic goes, then there is no way to secure the *correct* interpretation. Any interpretation of the reading is just as valid as any other. Because common sense is saturated by this romantic individualism, many students wittingly or not conclude that careful study is not worth the effort.

Romantic (psychological) individualism is demonstrated also by the high number of students who claim to have their own thoughts, even though they fail to notice that they've taken that notion and expression from other people.[4] Here is further evidence: During class discussion I sometimes include quotations in response to student questions, for example a line from Nietzsche, William James, Kenneth Burke, or maybe McLuhan. In response to such citations, on more than one occasion, students have said, "O.K. Fine. But what do *you* think. I want to know what your opinion is, not what someone else thinks." I can't help but say, "This is what I think; these guys aren't thinking anything. They're dead, have been for some time! These are *my* thoughts now." My response can be explained further with an illustration: During his long scholarly career, Wittgenstein grew to disagree with his own earlier position and later offered a corrective, one which radically challenged his earlier writings. Now, if some persons only have read and

still adhere to the earlier writings, whose position would they be holding? Certainly not the "late" Wittgenstein's. Additionally, student criticisms such as those just mentioned make it seem as if people aren't required to earn ideas and as if they aren't challenged to become who they need to become in order to grasp them. They make it seem as if ideas are found in books the way food is found in refrigerators. This also shows how common sense wants it both ways. On the one hand, people claim that books can be too difficult to read. On the other hand, they imply that ideas are taken from books easily, as if ideas simply lay about waiting to be adopted by less-than-original thinkers. Rather than wanting to have their own thoughts, readers ought to actively celebrate and cultivate their openness to history and to others. They thus would become willing interlocutors with the many brilliant minds who have come before them. My colleague Robert Mayberry puts it this way, "Students must learn to ask more than, 'Can I get others to understand what I mean by my words?' They more fundamentally should ask, 'Can I learn to understand what others mean by *their words*?'"

A final contributor to reading atrophy may be much larger than those so far addressed. Reading good books may seem to be less than worth the effort because we fail to imagine noble or grand purposes for learning. Without such purposes we falter, or as Thayer was wont to say to his students, "What we know is always constrained and enabled by our purposes for knowing." A practical implication is that if we sense that what we talk about has little worth outside the classroom (if we cannot imagine other reasons for knowing it) little effort may seem justified in learning it. But if we believe that what we talk about bears on what we need to know for life (if we can imagine grand purposes for knowing something), then much expended effort can seem justified and appropriate. Indeed, if course material is believed to be vital to students' futures, to their very humanity, then teachers may feel justified in requiring a great deal of effort from students. But if teachers believe that what is to be learned is of only moderate value (e.g., in course content or even in subject matter), they may feel guilt about having students work too hard on it. Some systematic avoidance of reading good books, on the part of both students and teachers, may be a kind of admission that, given the goals and purposes brought to what is to be learned from, only minimal effort is justified.

WHY READ GOOD BOOKS?

So why should we want to read good books? What makes reading good books worth the effort? If, as Twain suggests, "the man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who cannot read them," then what are the advantages? Obviously, he could have meant any number of things.

Maybe Twain meant that reading good books frequently requires learning new words. One advantage of such reading, then, is that our vocabulary grows, or at least it can. Furthermore, learning new words arguably offers more advantages than merely learning new information. Let me explain. Words learned are not normally learned as facts to be recalled later. Words, qua words, are the way facts come to be known. The word "fact," in fact, comes from the Latin "factum," meaning, "to make." Words, although they are the "how" of how we are able to know what we know, are not normally known facts. When we speak we do not consciously attend *to* our words. The words are "focally absent" (Leder, 1990) as we experience only their power to separate and merge aspects of the world (Burke, 1952). Still, isn't it interesting that when you learn a new word, you can hear it when it's used around you? Isn't it also interesting that we do not experience the opposite case? We don't hear all of the different unknown words used around us. All unknown words are the same; they lack meaningful differentiation from one another. This is why any particular one can be exceedingly difficult to recall. One advantage of reading good books, therefore, is that our sense of the world grows with our growing lexicons.[5]

A second advantage comes, ironically enough, from the very effort difficult reading can and does require. Unfortunately, contemporary pedagogical focus on message clarity feeds students' assumptions that all difficult reading is a product of bad writing. "If only the writings were easier," students seem to think, "then we could solve the problem of reading." Jacques Barzun (1991), in his *Begin Here*, identifies the larger trend of which this complaint is but a symptom:

> In the name of progress and method, innovation, and statistical research, educationalists have persuaded the world that teaching [reading?] is a set of complex problems to be solved. It is no such thing. It is a series of *difficulties*. They recur endlessly and have to be met; there is no solution—which means also that there is no mystery. (p. 5)

Many good books, therefore, offer natural resistances, not problems that could have been solved by simpler writing. And more to the practical point: what are we to do with the countless good books that already have been written, many of which, perhaps most, are not models of message clarity? We should recognize this as one of their strengths. They gain part of their value because they can be so difficult, because they require patience and devotion. Is it even possible for TV to provide such difficulties? When have you heard someone on TV use a word you didn't know? Television, as Neil Postman (1985) observes, mainly panders to viewers and tries to keep them amused. On the whole, TV provides pleasurable leisure rather than laborious recreation and so it robs viewers of the struggle to make meaning. In his book, *The Mature Society*, the Nobel Laureate Dennis Gabor (1972) addresses how value is conferred through effort:

> I fall back on a simple homely psychology, based on two observations which most people will be able to check from their own experience, or from their own insight.
>
> *I. Humans are wonderful in adversity, weak in comfort, affluence and security.*
>
> *II. Humans do not appreciate what they get without an effort.*
>
> The first of these gives us a warning of the dangers, the second gives us a hint how we may perhaps be able to avoid them. (p. 47)

Although students may sense the amount of effort some good books demand and also may realize the arduous struggle of becoming great readers, their quick conclusion that such labors are not worth the effort fails to recognize how effort can be a vital source of worth. In sum, an asset of many good books is that they nat-

urally provide, as Jean Paul Sartre (1956) would say, "co-efficients of adversity." Their difficulties provide for us; they are winds or even sails.

A third advantage of reading good books is that as we work our way through them we learn how to move within particular *styles* of thought. Our own thought is thereby trained to unfold according to certain thinking styles, particular semantic choices and syntactical maneuvers. Learning how to move according to a given text's style of thought—its particular intonational contour—is not only why some good books can be so difficult, but also why they offer the advantages they do. In other words, we practice the art of reading good books not merely, nor even primarily, to access information. Perhaps the cultivation of thinking styles remains underappreciated in contemporary life because many reading diets consist mainly of popular magazines, advertisements, textbooks, and quickly consumable Internet information. While students read such texts, the actual and implied author can fade from view. In place of a dialogue and an interlocutor they find an odd kind of thing: "information." But when they read a good book crafted by a masterful writer, the style itself can make apparent that they are engaged in a dialogue. The author's style holds a signature, an indelible mark of the book's dialogic character. When reading a textbook, in contrast, students can easily forget that reading is a practice of comprehension and expression. They may even reduce it to mechanical "information transfer." But Heinz von Foerster (1980) well reminds us that "A library may store books but it cannot store information. . . . One might as well speak of a garage as a storage and retrieval system for transportation. In both instances a potential vehicle (for transportation or for information) is confused with the thing it does when someone makes it do it. *Someone* has to do it. *It* does not do anything" (p. 19). The more education focuses on information and neglects the growth of human capacities and the direction of human aims, the less likely that difficult reading will be recognized in its advantages over other communication media.

In the first volume of his *Journals and Papers*, Søren Kierkegaard (1967) lists the entry "Communication," which includes detailed discussions of indirect communication and the distinction between the "communication of knowledge" and the "communication of capability." Communication of capability, Kierkegaard suggests, is done indirectly and remains without an "object." Although we can try to "pound knowledge *into* students," he argues, we must try to "pound capability *out* of them" (pp. 269-318). This means that we must begin practicing right away regardless of our unreadiness. He writes:

> Genuine communication and instruction is *training* or *upbringing*. . . . Confusion arises when the upbringer instead of upbringing teaches as if he were imparting knowledge . . . the rule is to do it as well as one can at every moment, and then again to do it as well as one can the next momenr, and so on further, in order continually to get to know it better and better. If, on the other hand, the upbringing is communicated as knowledge, one never reeeives an upbringing but is always getting merely something to know. . . . The rule for the communication of eapability is: begin immediately to do it. If the learner says: I can't, the teacher answers: Nonsense, do it as well as you can. With that the instruction begins. Its end result is: to be able. But it is not knowledge whieh is communicated. (pp. 279-284)

In Kierkegaard's account, information conveyed is not as essential as the capability indirectly communicated. As organic systems of expression and comprehension, people grow in their abilities to express and to comprehend. This growth is often more vital than the imagined "thing" called information, which is presumably transferred from one mind to another. The practice of reading of good books, then, helps people to experience for themselves the meaning of Allen Wheelis' (1974) suggestions that, we have to be someone before we can know anything. And when we have become someone, the something we can know is less than the someone we have become.

The advantages of reading good books are not limited to those that come from activities of reading. Some emerge later, arising from the particular subject matter read. For example, if one person reads what others have read, those common reading experiences may engender or enrich discussion on various issues or topics. Moreover, if people have read books unknown to their interlocutors, they can seem, at least initially, to be the original source of what is said. This is why plagiarism is an ever present possibility and temptation. How much mystification in everyday conversation springs from this source? Where do ideas come from? Perhaps we are deeply misinformed about the natures of both reading and persons. How can a text, a material thing to which I presumably attribute meaning, teach me something? How, exactly, can we grow familiar with any given work? Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1973) encourages us to acknowledge how our own thought is indebted to the thought of others and to notice how that indebtedness can remain covered over. He writes,

> I am Stendhal while reading him. . . . Sedimented language is the language the reader brings with him, the stock of accepted relations between signs and familiar significations without which he could never even have begun to read...in the end a new signification is secreted. It is the effect through whieh Stendhal's own language comes to life in the reader's mind, henceforth for the reader's own use. Once I have acquired this language, I can easily delude myself into believing that I could have understood it by myself, because it transformed me and made me capable of understanding it. . . . Here then, I would have to admit that I do not live just my own thought but that, in the exercise of speech, I *become* the one to whom I am listening. (pp. 12-13; 118)

It is fascinating that we can understand utterances that we could not spontaneously generate on our own. It also is fascinating that we, in both listening and reading, are able to understand those who speak more articulately than ourselves. Have you ever heard someone speak so eloquently that you surprised yourself by your ability to understand and appreciate what was said? Moreover, have you noticed that what we imagine as "sayable" is shaped and formed by what we have heard and read?

William James' (1958) writing on habit and imitation is relevant here. He suggests that through imitating those we aspire to be, we come to know ourselves. He writes,

> We become conscious of what we ourselves are by imitating others—the consciousness of what the others are precedes—the sense of self grows by the same pattern. The

> entire accumulated wealth of mankind—languages, arts, institutions, and sciences—is passed on from one generation to another by which Baldwin has called social heredity, each generation simply imitating the last. (p. 49)

A phonetic text is a kind of score, a set of instructions for making sounds. Voice, including pronunciation, intonation, and articulation, is an essential component of reading and of interpretation more generally. Of course, mimetically reproducing the score of a phonetic text does not magically transmit meaning from the author's mind to the readers' (Olson, 1994). In this regard, phonetic text can easily generate delusions of understanding as it allows us to accurately pronounce (i.e., to sound out) what we do not understand. Obviously then, the goal is not simply to produce sounds accurately but to carefully interpret what those sounds *mean*. In practice this means we need others to discuss readings with us.

Our talk with others about readings is an essential part of reading. But this is stated too simply. In his *A History of Reading*, Alberto Manguel (1996) tells of his reading aloud to Borges and how Borges analyzed, extrapolated, and elaborated as he followed along. Manguel's point is that sometimes, perhaps often, we need experienced readers as guides. Like a tall mountain, a good book can be difficult to climb. To scale any one, we may first need to become familiar with it, find likely spots to make purchases on its surface. For a successful climb we may need to be part of a team guided by a seasoned expert climber. Routes leading to impasses can then be headed off, and, places where the terrain is loose and shaky can be strategically traversed.

Finally, some students may only have encountered books which address them as competent employees or well-functioning social roles. They may yet to have encounter books which explicitly address them in their humanity, as a *person*. Indeed, good books provide us with more than "facts" or "the news," and reading good books entails something more profound than keeping oneself informed. It opens us to what can be thought about and helps us learn how to think. There is a critical difference between learning how to think about what needs thinking about and keeping oneself informed. The underlying issue, the deep roots one might say, is that U.S. popular culture seems to have bought wholesale into psychological (individualistic) understandings of minds, persons, and texts. Underestimation and under-appreciation of reading travels hand in hand with pop-psychological notions of intelligence and information. One of the main advantages of reading good books is that it generates incontrovertible proof, solid unmistakable evidence, of how malleable we are. Thus, resources for empirically demonstrating the shortcomings of psychological individualism are to be found within the practice of reading good books.

CLOSING REMARKS

University mission statements often contain some definition of a "college education." This, not surprisingly, often includes the claim that students ideally develop "life-long skills of critical thinking, articulate expression, and independent learning."[6] In practice, this means that reading good books is key. In many respects the most important thing I learned in college was how to read, that is, how to appreciate reading and book culture more generally. Perhaps reading strikes me as so essential because prior to college I read pretty little and liked books even less. I disliked comic books, read close to no fiction, and on the rare occasions when I looked at nonfiction of general human interest, my encounters were sparse, short, and lonely. I prematurely concluded that books were lame. Had I not taken college courses which required reading good books, and by this I mean NOT MERELY TEXTBOOKS, my opinion, I genuinely believe, never would have changed. If students are required to read good books they might be enticed to become great readers. People's basic attitudes about books and reading change as a result of what they do and do not read. I believe those who read good books are more likely to continue to read independently.

"In order for a dialogue to begin," Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1983) suggests, "the first voice must be heard." A book is an invitation to a dialogue, one where we are encouraged to meet authors on their terms. But because of the growing infantilization of the culture, some people may never enter into such a dialogue, for they fail to hear the first voice. Teachers must beware the temptation to meet students "at their level." Even if it is true, that "each receives according to his capacity," or even granting that, as Abraham Maslow (1967) puts it "the world can communicate to a person only that which he is worthy, that which he deserves or is "up to"; that to a large extent, he can receive from the world and, give to the world, only that which he himself is" (p. 195) the case remains: To read a great work we may have to labor, we may have to become someone in order to understand. Reading, we must never forget, is a *practice*. If only we would take as much effort and devotion studying good books as the authors did in crafting and composing them. Then we would realize how enriched we are as we become able to engage in meaningful dialogues with the minds found within and without them. One final advantage worth mentioning is that the more books we labor over, the more we are able to read and also the more easily we, when encountering an author for the first time, accept that we always begin unready. We learn to accept that our readiness to read emerges only after we already have begun.

Practical counsel for those struggling to become great readers: Try to remember back to when you first learned how to read. When you started you were unable to read, and then, by some action, you learned how. *How did that happen*?

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NOTES

1. I don't know what exactly Twain meant by "good books." I originally thought that I should offer some examples of what I mean by good books, but after several attempts, I concluded that *any* such selection, no matter how extensive, becomes overly canonizing and is hopelessly complicit in too grand of omissions. Perhaps

Barzun's (1991) call for the reading of "real" books, which he defines as "a book one wants to reread" (p. 115) provides enough clarity for Twain's expression.
2. How many of Twain's good books would undergraduates label "unreadable"? Or, how many of the 54 Great Books of the Western World that Hutchins and Adler put together would today's students find readable?
3. Notice the failure to have learned the lesson so eloquently stated by Robert Maynard Hutchins (1968): "The more technological the society is, the more rapidly it will change and the less valuable *ad hoc* instruction will become. It now seems safe to say that the most practical education is the more theoretical one" (p. 19).
4. José Ortega Y Gasset (1958) addresses this contrast between the veneer of individualism and the deep fact of sociality. He writes,

> With some shame we recognize that the greater part of the things we say we do not understand very well; and if we ask ourselves why we say them, why we think them, we will observe that we say them only for this reason: that we have heard them said, that other people say them. (p. 92)

Could it be that we either consciously select where we get our ideas, or that we, thinking that we are thinking for ourselves, simply take our ideas off the rack, from what *anyone* has to say about things? Try to argue against the following: Any person who has interesting thoughts did not build them from the bottom up. No person who we find intellectually interesting is out howling in the woods. And, is it at all surprising that those who do think for themselves are those who most often explicitly acknowledge their influences and indebtedness to others? Two scholars meet. Among the earliest questions are: "Who were your major influences?" and, "Who are you currently reading?"
5. Well beyond the scope of the present article, someone might document the wholesale loss of everyday terms in the English language. A vast storehouse for analyzing and understanding the most complex of interpersonal relations, English is slowing becoming more and more filled with "intorductory textbookeese." Ask your students to define the words "indignation," or "venerate," or "obsequious." Most cannot. Ask them to define the difference between "envy" and "jealousy." Again, most cannot. Comparatively, ask them to define the words such as "co-dependent," "introvert," "anal," "type A-personality," "stressed," or, "learning disabled." Almost all students will have some attempted definition.
6. Taken from page 2 of the Grand Valley State University Undergraduate and Graduate Catalogue.

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