



A Sample Program in Textuality

In this book I have been trying to teach about teaching, or—as Wittgenstein might have put it—to teach the unteachable. I have tried, perversely, to show that we need to use our creative powers to interpret sacred texts as closely as possible, imagining the intentions of their creators, and to use our critical powers to tease out the values hidden in profane texts, so as to see what we may learn from them about our own lives. In all of this, I have assumed that reading is a constructive process, a kind of writing, whether it ends up in images in the mind, in sounds in the air, in pixels on a screen, or ink on a page. Learning to re-weave the texts we encounter in the texts of our lives is the process I have been trying to describe, and, in particular, I have tried to show how teachers may share this process with students. All this has a practical side, as well, and in this epilogue I will offer some advice in that direction. But first, a personal anecdote.

As I was finishing this book, I was visited by three people I had taught as undergraduates fifty years ago at the University of Virginia. In one case, I had advised a young man to change his major from math to English. He had asked what he could do with an English major. I had replied that he could go to law school. He did just that and had a successful career as a lawyer. Another had told me he wanted to go to divinity school and become a minister. I did everything I could to talk him out of that, lending him books about ministers by James Gould Cozzens, Sinclair Lewis, and others. He

ignored my advice, and had a very satisfying career as a minister. In the case of the third student, I don't recall ever giving him career advice, but he went to graduate school, got a PhD in English, and had an excellent career as a professor. But they were all grateful to me—not for what I had advised them to do but because I had cared about them and cared about what I was teaching. Which means, as I understand it, that the recommendations that follow here will be useful only to people who care about their students and care about the texts they share with those students. If they don't care about the curriculum I propose, they should invent another one that they do care about. The essential matter for teachers of textuality is to get the interpretation of sacred texts into the curriculum, and to help students take pleasurable texts seriously—and to care about both the texts and the students. Here, then, is a program that I could care about.

This is not an ideal program but an attempt to describe something that is actually possible within the framework of existing departments. Even so, it is probably more than many schools are likely to attempt. I hope, however, that it may be sufficiently realistic for English departments to consider—if they are creative enough or desperate enough, or both. What follows here is a suggestion for a core of courses to be followed by advanced work drawn from whatever curriculum is already in place in a given institution. It is just a suggestion, however. There are many ways to do this. But we need to find better ways to help students think about critical interpretation and what is at stake in reading important texts. The idea is that students who have gone through this core will learn more from standard courses than students who have not had this core experience. The core will ensure a grounding in textuality: reading and writing with some sophistication. The language requirement will enhance these skills. And the introduction to modernism will provide a framework for viewing earlier (and later) forms of cultural production. The basic courses should be

open to all students, replacing (or competing with) the standard composition and introduction to literature options.

To actually generate a program like this, given the current divisions in programs and departments, it might be necessary to make it interdepartmental, involving English, Media, and Comparative Literature, for example—but it can be done, if the energy and willpower are there to do it.



LANGUAGE REQUIREMENT (not a prerequisite)

Reading proficiency in an ancient language or a modern language other than English

BASIC COURSES

I. A writing course, of course. But every member of the department should teach one, and the sections should be small enough for the individual attention that writing instruction requires. This course should be writing about reading. That is, all instructors should design a set of readings in which they are interested themselves—interested enough to get students to share that interest. It can be writing about film, or writing about poetry, or writing the personal essay, or writing about advertising. An instructor at Brown (Jonathan Goldman) had good success with a “Writing About *Ulysses*” section of a basic writing course. But every section should be clearly described so that students can choose what they want to write about as well as who they want to study with, and when they want to be in class. In the Department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown a few years ago, a teaching assistant and I offered two sections of a course called “Textuality,” in which we used a book put together by Nancy Comley, Greg Ulmer, and myself, called *Text Book*. This book breaks the line between creative and noncreative forms of writing and offers a range of challenging and playful assignments.

A Sample Program in Textuality | 143

This book, or one of its imitators, might work well. But choice is very important in the success of such a course. Instructors must choose their topics, and students select topics that interest them. In the sections, students should write a lot, and get feedback from one another as well as from the instructor. Digital methods of communication can work well in writing courses.

2. Reading Sacred Texts (theories of interpretation and canonicity with readings in religious and political texts). This course should explore notions of “literal” and “strict” reading, intentionality, and the designation of texts as “sacred” or “special.” Some discussion of literary “canonicity” and literary interpretation may be included but should not dominate. The main function of this course should be to emphasize the distance between the originators of such texts and ourselves, as a way of helping students avoid the tendency to impose their own views on whatever they read. The place for one’s own views comes after understanding the views embodied in the text, and this is an important lesson that we all need to learn over and over again. The course ought to be writing-intensive, with small sections, though it could work with a large lecture combined with small workshops that emphasize discussion and writing. Guest lectures by faculty from religious and political departments might work very well for this purpose.

INTERMEDIATE COURSES

3. An Ancient Culture Course. For example, *Histor and Rhetor*: Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, and readings in ancient historians (Herodotus, Xenophon, Thucydides, Livy, Tacitus—looking at the rhetoric of speeches, for example, in the historical texts, and the tension between rhetoric and history that exists in them). The purpose of a course like this is to get students thinking about the ancient world, and the way that the concept of history developed in connection with and opposition to notions of rhetoric. (I

taught a version of “Histor and Rhetor” at Iowa in the late 60s. It went quite well.) An alternative might be Aristotle’s *Poetics* and “Longinus on the Sublime,” with readings in ancient drama. But the main point is to allow students to enter a world very different from our own and consider a coherent body of works from that world, including works that take a critical or theoretical stance about the form of textual production being considered—as Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* do.

4. Comparative Textuality (a range of texts selected in order to illustrate how interpretive methods apply across the media—and how they must be modified). In particular, texts that have crossed media, like Shakespeare’s *Othello* and Verdi’s *Otello*, or Isherwood’s Berlin stories and *Cabaret*, belong in such a course. Situating texts in their historical and cultural context must be a part of this process, which means that texts from different times and places should be considered. This asks participating faculty to have some range, which runs counter to current modes of specialization, but I think it is healthy. Many of our faculty are less narrow in their interests than they may seem to be.
5. Understanding Modernism (debates, manifestos, examples, using magazine resources, such as the *New Age*, *Rhythm*, *Blast*, the *Egoist*, the *Little Review*, *Poetry*, the *Crisis*). In this course modernism may be presented as a set of literary works that are published along with their supporting manifestos and arguments about them. Topics such as imagism (or *imagisme*), futurism, vorticism, and the debates that surrounded them should be covered. But modernism also includes social and political movements, like the push for women’s suffrage or racial justice. In movements like futurism, the political was never far from the artistic. Modernism was the filter through which the cultures of the past came to our own time, shaping the way we perceive them, which gives it a special place in a textual curriculum. This course will have to be taught by people with training in the field, but their interests

should not be confined to America or Britain. Modernism was an international phenomenon.

ADVANCED COURSES

These can be drawn from currently available courses, with whatever requirements for distribution across historical periods, genres, languages, and media seem appropriate, drawn from a range of relevant departments. Connections to modern and contemporary culture should be made in all these courses. For example, a study of eighteenth-century British literature should not ignore advertising in the *Spectator*, which anticipates modern advertising in many ways. And a course in Shakespeare should consider the ways his plays have been adapted for such other media as opera and film.