Teaching the Reading of Primary Texts - overview

George Macdonald Ross

Contributions and discussion notes

Contributions were made by the following speakers:

- Mike Garfield, Section Leader in Philosophy, Manchester Metropolitan University - workshop contribution
- Dr Keith Crome, Teaching Fellow, Manchester Metropolitan University - workshop contribution

Introduction

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In discussing the teaching of reading of primary texts, the following issues present themselves:

1. Problems rather than solutions

The question of how adults do or should read is under-researched. Teachers make implicit assumptions about what students will do when they are told to read a book. But do the students know what to do? And do they know how to do it?

2. Surface vs. deep reading

There are different academic literacies, which require different approaches, especially surface versus deep reading. The humanities usually expect deep reading - though surface reading is sometimes appropriate (getting a quick overview, or searching for a reference). Do we expect students to read primary and secondary texts in the same way, or to read secondary texts more quickly and superficially? Even within primary literature, we might expect students to read a lot of novels quickly, but a small number of poems slowly and carefully.

3. Students' previous experience

Do we know whether students have had any previous experience of deep reading primary texts? Almost certainly if they have read literature in a foreign language; otherwise probably not, even if they have studied English literature. There is heavy reliance on what teachers say in class, and on potted handouts or textbooks; and there is evidence that students who take short cuts do better at A-level and university. Even students with good A-levels may not know what to do if they are told to go away and read a book.
4. Time

Many students are poor at time management. At school, their time was managed for them (apart from some homework). At university, only a small proportion of their time is spent in class; but many of them expect this to be the main vehicle for their learning ('Even if I don't read the book, the lecturer will explain what I need to know for the exam.') Research shows that humanities students (for various reasons) spend little more than 20 hours a week on academic work (including classes). Do we accept the status quo, or find ways of making them work longer hours? If we set our sights too high, they will simply read more superficially.

Do we know how much time students should be expected to spend deep-reading a primary text, or surface-read secondary literature? It depends on the difficulty of the text, the depth expected, the abilities and background knowledge of the individual student, and on their level of concentration. Is time even a sensible measure? Perhaps the only solution is an empirical one: to get the students to keep a diary of how much time they have taken to achieve how much, and revise future expectations accordingly.

5. Legibility

Most academic texts offend against all known rules of typographic legibility (long lines, long paragraphs, small print, poor typeface), and present other obstacles such as not lying flat, inaccessible endnotes, etc. Although experienced academics have learned to cope, these physical shortcomings may be a disincentive to many students, and an insuperable barrier for dyslexics. If you want students to read something, you should make it as easy as possible to read (though there may be no choice in the case of printed texts). One solution is to make texts available electronically, since the reader can control the presentation. Many students are averse to reading on screen; but this may be a diminishing problem as a new generation brought up on computers comes through.

6. Intelligibility

If students can't understand what they are told to read, they will give up. There are three main kinds of difficulty:

(a) Linguistic. This is especially a problem with historical texts, since students may have had no previous experience of reading pre-19th- or 20th-century literature. Not only are words unknown, but there may be unfamiliar grammatical constructions, or long sentences which students don't know how to parse. In subjects like English, this problem has to be tackled head-on. In philosophy, where mastery of older English is not an objective, there is a strong case for translating earlier anglophone philosophers into modern English, just as we do with their contemporaries who wrote in other languages. Obviously students should be encouraged to use dictionaries (many don't); but this doesn't help when students don't realise that a word is used in a different sense from its modern one.

(b) Background. In many cases, students lack the necessary background knowledge to make sense of passages which presuppose what would have been obvious to contemporary readers. A partial solution is structural: it will be easier for students to read a primary text if they have been given relevant background material in a prerequisite module. Otherwise, the only solution is to ensure that the necessary background is available as they read - through textual notes, running commentaries, etc. (One advantage of having electronic texts is that commentaries can be linked to the text itself. An alternative possibility is a commentary guiding the student through the text on an audio-cassette.)

(c) Intrinsically difficult. Some texts, especially in philosophy, theology, and poetry, remain difficult even after all other problems have been overcome. When students arrive in class having failed to understand what they have been asked to read, it is important to resist the temptation simply to give them your understanding, since this will demotivate them from trying in future. The same goes for most secondary literature, which students will use as a substitute for the primary text. It's better to go through part of the text in class, eliciting understanding through questions. But ideally this situation wouldn't arise in the first place, and prevention is better than cure.

7. Motivation
Students need to be motivated. Rather than just passively reading (which is boring), they need to be given a task with an end-product, which can be completed only through reading and understanding the text. For example, a set of notes (which might count towards assessment); short answers to carefully framed questions (which could be discussed in class); a learning journal (which would provide empirical evidence of how the students are learning, and how long it takes); or specific tasks such as extracting formal arguments, or finding passages in which words are used in different senses.

While it is desirable that students should be motivated by the intrinsic interest to them of what they are doing, it is inevitably the case that most of them are motivated primarily by assessment. (Some cynical educationalists say that students won't do anything that is not assessed.) Often students do the required reading only when they have an essay to write (and then only the relevant part of it). As far as practicable, students should be assessed little and often on tasks which directly promote their deep reading of the text. (There are ways of keeping down the burden on the lecturer: random selection of pieces of work, peer assessment, etc.)

8. Teaching how to read

If it is an objective of a module that students should read a primary text, then this should be clearly stated as a learning outcome; time should be spent on developing the skill; and success should be explicitly assessed. As always, more time on skills development means less time on syllabus delivery. But in a text-based module, the syllabus is the text, and students will learn more if they are motivated and able to read it carefully.

Students need to be given advice on how to read. This might take the form of a handbook, an introductory class, or both. Some of the advice might be quite generic (such as in any study guide), but there will also need to be subject-specific, and perhaps even text-specific advice. However, advice alone is not sufficient, since students may not read it; and if they read it, they may not apply it. It is important that they should be given assessed tasks which can be performed only through following the advice.

A classic method of teaching is to teach by example. You can demonstrate the process of making sense of a text in class, so that students can practise a similar technique in their own private reading. This helps to answer the question of what students are actually supposed to do when they are told to read slowly and deeply. It's not simply a question of spending more time, but of what activities they perform during that time. Unless they are shown what to do, they may have no idea how to occupy their minds.

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