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Reading Then and Now [1]

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The single largest problem I face as a professor of English at the University of Colorado at Boulder is that even English majors no longer know how to read; and, it seems, some don't even like to read. In order to grapple with this problem, I propose to conduct a research project based on my expertise in literacies of the past that would generate student projects on their own reading practices in the present. In these projects, students would identify, investigate, and describe the different ways reading shapes their lives as well as the various kinds of reading they engage in (such as reading for information; analytical reading; reading for pleasure; internet reading; reading standardized tests; aural reading, such as listening to books on tape; sacred reading). Through such projects students would learn that various social structures shape their reading practices, that they depend on various kinds of reading throughout their day, and that particular reading events require particular reading practices.

I propose to conduct a course Reading Practices, Then and Now that would be organized around the topics of class, gender, religion, and race and ethnicity (as understood in the Middle Ages) as they shaped reading in the past. The class would include discussion of such kinds of reading as documentary reading (according to M.T. Clanchy, even peasants could read some kinds of documents); "interrupted" reading (for example, Leo Steinberg has drawn attention to the predominant image of the Virgin Mary in annunciation portraits as a woman interrupted in her reading of the Bible, and in Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde, Pandarus interrupts Criseyde reading a war story to tell her of Troilus's love for her); passionate reading (in one of the most famous moments of Dante's Inferno, Paolo and Francesca's reading of the story of Lancelot and Guinevere precipitates their love affair); bilingual reading and the creation of the English vernacular (in texts such as Piers Plowman ethnicity comes to the fore in the past); visual and aural reading (many listened to rather than read texts or learned their Bible by looking at and "reading" images known as "books for the unlettered"); revolutionary reading (the leaders of the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381 drew on Piers Plowman to motivate rebellion); and, perhaps most importantly, the early history of the reading of the Bible, including debates about the literal sense of the Bible, scholastic, monastic, and heretical reading, and issues about access to the Bible.

At the end of each unit of the class, students would develop questionnaires that they would then take into their own varied reading locations--libraries, internet cafes, dorm rooms, airports, movie theaters--in order to identify different reading practices they engage in as well as the ways in which race and ethnicity, class, gender, and religion shape those practices. For an end-of-term project, students might, for example, investigate debates occurring today about fundamentalist reading practices applied to sacred texts from the Bible to the sayings of the Buddha to the Qur'an, and the material and political consequences of such reading. In order to expose students to reading practices outside the university, the class would include a required service-learning component in which students would teach at-risk students how to read. The goal of the class would be to identify varied reading practices and come to

understand the strengths and weaknesses of each one. At the end of the class we would hold a student conference open to the public and then seek publication of an essay authored by the class with my guidance summarizing the results of our inquiries in a journal such as Pedagogy or College English.

Groups audience:
President's Teaching Scholars Program

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