

## **Reading theory with students: Teaching (with) slow reading**

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### **Final Report**

The CTL Fellowship supported me in the creation of a new International Studies course taught in Spring 2014, “Theories of Race and Modernity in Latin America”. Beyond central course content, one of the primary goals of this course was to teach students to engage difficult texts through the practice of “slow” or “deep” reading.

#### *The issue:*

In intermediate-level undergraduate classes, we must deal with the tension between what the students do not know and what the readings we assign, and want them to confront intelligently, assume as common knowledge. We must also deal with students who are not necessarily interested or patient enough to wade through complex articulations of difficult ideas. In my experience, most students dutifully “read” an assignment once over, highlighting phrases or sentences that seem impressive, thought-provoking, or important, then put the assignment away without another thought (unless they’ve been asked to write some commentary about it), and arrive to class waiting for the professor to “explain” it.

In this new course, I chose five fundamental texts on race and modernity in Latin America, written by major Latin American intellectuals in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. These texts contain historical and cultural references unknown, or barely known, to my students, and they engage polemics with other intellectuals with whom students are also unlikely to be familiar. My aim was to teach students about the subject matter—the role of concepts of race in Latin American nationalism and projects of modernity—but to also teach them how this subject has been thought about and analyzed, how intellectuals have constructed complex arguments and theories, how and why they ask the questions they ask, and how they connect with other arguments and theories. The course, then, combined the acquisition of knowledge with the acquisition of a skill that should be useful in future courses and intellectual endeavors—the ability, and desire, to read slowly and deeply.

#### *Applying slow reading*

In my course, I asked students to engage a series of questions that would help them not only understand better the subject matter of the class, but become stronger readers in general and read more intelligently any material they come across in the future. Among the questions that guided the class are: How do we deal with vocabulary and discipline-specific knowledge we do not understand? How do we treat historical references we do not know? How do we contend with references to other authors and arguments? How does the writer develop and sustain a coherent and complex argument over a long (sometimes book-length) essay?

At the beginning of the course, I presented the class with guidelines for reading and with a series of assignments for supporting deep reading, from which I chose a

couple for the students to use for each assigned reading. I assigned less total pages of reading for each class than I generally do, in order to give the students time to engage more fully with the texts. (The handout is reproduced below)

I also developed writing assignments around the concept of deep reading. The assignments required the students to critically engage a new text in ways that brought it into active dialogue with other class readings. Because the texts I chose were deceptively straightforward, students had to read deeply to adequately analyze them.

### *Results*

Because this is a new course for me, and I rarely teach in English, it is hard to confirm absolutely that the deep-reading techniques generated positive results. However, this class was certainly one of the most lively and engaged classes I have taught at Trinity. Often the class ended with many hands still in the air, and students reported continuing their discussions of course material in their dorms and in the cafeteria. Many students sent me links to related articles that “made (them) think of our class,” or simply emailed to follow up with thoughts on the day’s discussion. Course evaluations showed that while the majority of the students found the course “very challenging,” they also self-reported as “very engaged.”

The writing assignments were my biggest disappointment. It was clear many students did not give themselves enough time to read the texts they were to criticize, and therefore tended to read and analyze superficially rather than deeply. The few students who did take their regular assignment reading techniques to the texts to be analyzed for the essays, however, did fabulous work.

As I prepare to teach this course again, I will look for ways to support students better as they analyze the outside texts assigned for the analytical essays and to develop sections of the course exams that somehow recognize the class emphasis on slow reading.

### *Conclusion*

The year spent as a CTL Fellow was transformative. The monthly fellows’ meetings were inspiring, and provided an ideal space to vent frustrations and hammer out solutions, in a cooperative and congenial environment. My teaching benefited greatly from the regular and sustained opportunities to reflect on pedagogy within a group of dedicated, creative, and energetic colleagues.

## INTS 240: Theories of Race and Modernity in Latin America Spring 2014

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*Reading for this class:*

1. Read slowly, thoughtfully, and more than once
2. Mark the text and take notes
3. Read all of the footnotes
4. Look up terms (vocabulary) you don't know
5. Look up history/historical events you don't know
6. Look up people/names you don't recognize (and keep a list)
7. Read summaries of theories or arguments mentioned

*Assignments:*

- #1. Reverse outline – outline the chapter, make note of major themes and arguments, note how argument is constructed and flows
- #2. Focus on the beginning/opening paragraph(s)—what are the major themes, terms presented? how are they presented? what jumps out at you?
- #3. Against what/whom? –against which theories or which thinkers is the author writing?
- #4. Informants? – on the flip side, who are the thinkers whose work informs/influences the author? how does knowing this influence our interpretation of the reading?
- #5. Look up terms –look up and thoroughly understand the key terms in the reading
- #6. Major questions—what are the major questions being asked by the author? what are the answers he/she proposes?
- #7. My questions—what questions do you have? can you begin to articulate possible answers?

(Some activities adapted from Newkirk, Thomas. *The Art of Slow Reading*, New York, Heineman, 2011)