

**CTL Fellows Final Report**  
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**Project abstract and goals**

During this fellowship I was interested in exploring the following questions: How do we become strong academic citizens? What habits do we cultivate in order to get the most out of, and contribute the most in return to, a learning environment? I wanted to develop ways to help students cultivate fundamental academic skills and intellectual habits in a First Year Seminar, with the idea that they could transfer these habituated ways of being a student to the rest of their course work at Trinity. In the seminar I considered how to introduce students to a basic set of skills and competencies they should develop—careful preparation and active participation in class, facilitating discussion, negotiating intellectual disagreements with generosity and discernment, reading critically and dialogically, library research skills, writing as a multi-stage process of revision, etc.—and how to give them opportunities to practice said skills.

However, more importantly, I was interested to see what it takes to convince students that the cultivation of such practices is a conscious choice on their part—something they can choose, or choose not, to foster. Thus I sought to put into practice a number of exercises and activities within the seminar to develop both the ability to do a number of different things and the discipline of choosing to do so regularly. Beyond putting these mechanics in place I identified the overarching goal of project as the following:

- To convince students that the cultivation of intellectual excellence,
  - is worthwhile, (that is to say, at bare minimum, it is essential for contributing to a critically engaged citizenry and for leading an “examined life”),
  - is hard, (that is to say, it takes time and requires commitment and effort),
  - and is their own responsibility.

The first-year seminar in which I pursued this project was FYS 163: God and Sex. In order to introduce the idea of agency and responsibility in the cultivation of one’s own intellectual habits we began the semester by reading and discussing [David Foster Wallace’s commencement address](#) given at Kenyon College in 2005. We revisited this same text towards the end of the semester to reflect explicitly on the responsibility of the student for their own education, to learn to develop their own intellectual disciplines.

I broke down the requisite academic skills into three areas: a) critical and active reading, b) attentive listening and speaking, and 3) clear, original thinking and writing.

- A) Critical and Active Reading:** Here I wanted students to internalize the idea that whenever they read, they are not simply passive recipients of information but active respondents in a dialogue with and between texts, students, and professors. To this end, we had a class session on textual annotation (see Appendix #1) and I had them keep a commonplace journal throughout the term in which they explicitly recorded and responded to the ideas they were encountering in the course and beyond during their first semester at Trinity (see Appendix # 2).
- B) Attentive Listening and Speaking:** In this area the focus was to give students opportunities to practice developing academic habits that are required with corporate, rather than solitary, learning; i.e., how to be

active, responsible members of a classroom community. To this end, each of the students had to take a turn facilitating class discussion for the entirety of a class (see Appendix # 3). Another aspect of this skill I wanted students to have the opportunity to develop was the ability to debate ideas and negotiate intellectual disagreements civilly and productively. The particular subject matter of this seminar—the intersection of religion, gender and sexuality—provided plenty of opportunity to discuss topics upon which to debate and disagree (egs. religion and patriarchy, clothing restrictions, notions of purity and menstruation, religious teachings on sexuality, abortion and contraception, cross-cultural understandings of gender, etc.). The students in this seminar quickly learned how, not only to use accurate terminology in discussion, but to speak carefully, to point to evidence to support their points of view, to listen carefully and respectfully, and to maintain good humor and collegiality throughout the debates. Another of the assignments I had them do throughout the course of the term was to come to class unprepared—without having done the reading, or thought about the topic of discussion for that week at all. They were not to tell anyone beforehand, but to come to class and see how it felt, what impact it had on themselves and on others, and then to write a reflection essay on the experience. There was a certain amount of pressure on students, as they had to come on a day where our classroom discussion was being facilitated by a peer whom they would be letting down and the expectation for participation was high.

- C) **Clear and Original Thinking and Writing:** Most basically here, we discussed the difference between summarizing, analyzing, and evaluating textual arguments. To this end, I assigned three short papers which functioned cumulatively: initially the students wrote only a summary of an argument, then a summary and analysis, and finally a summary, analysis, and evaluation (see Appendix # 4-6). They also had a high stakes, but scaffolded, research paper assignment which entailed much back and forth between myself and the student, as well as two separate trips to the library with the research librarian, Jeff Liszka (see Appendix # 7).

## Conclusions

The first year seminar was an ideal setting for engaging in this project. There is no way of measuring the success of it, without tracking the students throughout their time here at Trinity. However, the energy and dynamic of the class was great and the students were enthusiastic and willing to go along with me. My only wish is that I had the time and space to dedicate more class time to the cultivation of such intellectual habits in all my courses. However, in courses where the most significant emphasis is on the transmission of content, I still plan on adapting one or more of the exercises into my regular teaching.

Likewise the CTL Fellows program was the ideal venue in which to articulate these goals and think through activities and processes to pursue them. Under the leadership of Dina Anselmi and Sean Cocco, and with an excellent cohort of fellows, the discussions of the seminar were enlightening and very helpful. I am so grateful for all the feedback and suggestions I received from this group.

## Appendix: Course materials and assignments:

### #1) ANNOTATION EXERCISE

In his New York Times Magazine article [“What I Really Want Is Someone Rolling Around in the Text,”](#) Sam Anderson explores the art of “marginalia”, or writing thoughts in the margins, and questions its preservation in the world of digital media:

“One day in college I was trawling the library for a good book to read when I found a book called “How to Read a Book.” I tried to read it, but must have been doing something wrong, because it struck me as old-fashioned and dull, and I could get through only a tiny chunk of it. That chunk, however, contained a statement that changed my reading life forever. The author argued that you didn’t truly own a book (spiritually, intellectually) until you had marked it up.

This hit home for me — it spoke to the little scribal monk who lives deep in the scriptorium of my soul — and I quickly adopted the habit of marginalia: underlining memorable lines, writing keywords in blank spaces, jotting important page numbers inside of back covers. It was addictive, and useful; I liked being able to glance back through, say, “Great Expectations,” and discovering all of its great sentences already cued up for me... This wasn’t exactly radical behavior — marking up books, I’m pretty sure, is one of the Seven Undying Cornerstones of Highly Effective College Studying. But it quickly began to feel, for me, like something more intense: a way to not just passively read but also to fully enter a text, to collaborate with it, to mingle with an author on some kind of primary textual plane.”

### Questions for class discussion:

- What do you think about Anderson’s claim that you don’t “own” a book until you have marked it up?
- What are the ways you can “mark up” books without writing directly in them (post-it notes, pencil)?
- How do you annotate books? (eg. underline topic sentences, use codes, write paragraph topic/questions in margins, circle significant/unfamiliar words, cross-reference, *add your own thoughts*)
- Does it depend on the kind of text you are reading?

### Exercise:

- Take the following page of text, read it and mark it up in ways that you normally would.
- Show your neighbor. What do they pull out as the most important thing in the text, based solely on glances at your annotations? Can they get a sense of the main idea, the tone, steps of the argument, questions you had, etc.?
- In groups come up with helpful codes or shorthand for common notes you might want to make in texts (stars, question mark, check, symbol for thesis, numbers for steps of argument, symbol for connecting links, etc.).
- Share with class.

## #2) “COMMONPLACE BOOK” ASSIGNMENT (due by last day of classes 5%)

Napoleon, Thomas Jefferson, Virginia Woolf, and Bill Gates have one thing in common: they all kept commonplace books.

The *Atlantic Monthly* calls commonplace books the “tumblers of an earlier era”.<sup>1</sup> Popular in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, there are essentially two different uses or purposes of the commonplace book. The first was a way to collect in one place anything that may be of use or interest to you later on: recipes, weights, dimensions, arguments, quotes from sermons, medical remedies, etc. The second reason was quite different; as the Atlantic puts it: “Its goal was to gather a collection of the wisest statements, usually of the ancients, for future meditation. And here the key thing was to *write the words in your own hand* -- by this means, by laboriously and carefully copying out the insights of people smarter than you, you could absorb and internalize their wisdom. Call it osmosis-by-handwriting.” It is, in other words, a way to gather together in one “common place” all the ideas and concepts that you find striking or interesting in some way.

This book gives you the opportunity for an ongoing engagement with the material of the course, especially engagement with the assigned readings. **Nb. I also encourage you to consider readings and materials from all of your courses this semester. *Any ideas you encounter over the next few months is fodder for your commonplace book.***

### Instructions

- Read widely and actively. Mark up your books with annotations and marginalia.
- Write down quotes – words, phrases, concepts, paragraphs – that strike you in some way. (Your entries need not only be verbal; you can also include copies of images.)
- Make sure you jot down where the entry comes from (author, title, page) so you can find it again if you ever want to go back to read it in context.
- Next, *respond* to the quote. Why did you choose it? Does it confuse you, inspire you, irritate you, etc?
- Don’t be afraid to link the quotes and place them in conversation with one another. (In this way the commonplace book also becomes a record of an ongoing dialogue between yourself and the authors, thinkers, and artists you encounter.)

### Evaluation

I will look through and read your commonplace book but I will not write in it or mark it up in any way. I will respond to it on a separate piece of paper. The book will be evaluated on a three-point scale considering the effort, seriousness, and creativity you employ (3=excellent, 2=sufficient, 1=barely attempted). I will also be looking for evidence that you’ve been working on the book all term, and not just cramming a bunch of entries into the final week of class. If in doubt about how you are doing it, feel free to bring the book to my office hours at any time to look over together and discuss.

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<sup>1</sup> See: <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/01/commonplace-books-the-tumblers-of-an-earlier-era/251811/>

### #3) INSTRUCTIONS FOR FACILITATING DISCUSSION:

The purpose of the assignment is to facilitate an engaging and lively discussion of the texts assigned for that week, using both your own questions and those of your peers.

#### Elements of facilitation:

1. **Initial presentation:** You should be prepared to spend the initial **4-5 minutes** orally presenting your “take” on the readings. Get us all on the same page with a brief review of the main salient points of the reading, and the aim and arc of its argument.

Once you have done that, begin to facilitate a discussion with all the members of the class.

2. **Framing a discussion and asking questions:** **a)** State here your own questions and/or points of discussion in response to the reading. (To come up with opening questions consider some of the following: What is the single most important point to get from the reading? What are the implications of the argument? Are any claims made that are particularly controversial or interesting? Etc.). Also, however, **b)** consider and organize the questions provided by your peers on the discussion forum on Moodle. Is there an order you think it makes sense to discuss their questions in?
3. **Direct and redirect conversation:** This involves actively listening to what your peers are saying, noticing who is speaking a lot and who is silent, helping to make sure misunderstandings don't occur, etc. This is less an opportunity to show what *you think*, and more an opportunity to show how you can *get others talking* and discussing ideas. To do so, you should think of yourself as occupying a neutral space in the classroom.

**Evaluation:** This assignment is worth 10% of your grade. You will be graded on the coherence, thoughtfulness, and accurateness of your initial presentation, as well as the clarity of your communication. You will also be graded on the questions you raise, and how you bring in your peers' questions. An important part of your role is listening and facilitating, not just presenting.

### #4) SHORT PAPER #1

Summary of Daniel Boyarin's article “Gender” in  
Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*

**Due:** Sept. 14 in class at 12:00pm.

**Length:** 250 words

**Late/Extension Policy:** requests for extensions will be considered up to 24 hours *before* the deadline for submission of work. If no extension is requested or granted a ½ grade taken off for each day late.

**Assignment:** The **sole purpose** of this paper is to restate the argument of the text *in your own words* and to demonstrate your comprehension of the reading. What is the author's

argument? Simply identifying the main thesis of the text, and then detailing the various steps of the argument the author uses to come to that conclusion, should occupy 100% of your paper. NB: To restate the argument of the text *in your own words* means that you should only use quotes from the text sparingly, and when absolutely crucial. But you should still cite (parenthetically) the page of the text where you specific ideas from. Whenever you paraphrase something specifically, show where you are getting the idea from textually.

### Process:

1. **Read carefully:** Annotate text; underline, write marginal notes, keep list of terms you don't understand to look up; identify paragraphs or sentences you think might be the author's primary thesis.
2. **Read again** – this time tracking the steps of the argument, and write those down on paper next to you.
3. **Sketch outline of argument:** with pen and paper begin to plan out how you think the argument works. What are the major steps along the way? Once you've established the argument outline...
4. **Read again to confirm:** Make sure each of your steps is found in the text in the order you have placed them. Note page number to reference when you paraphrase that part of the argument, and/or write down key phrases or terms you will want to quote.
5. **Write draft of your paper.**
6. **Give it a rest.** Do something else: sleep, have fun, go for a walk outside, go to a movie, or meet friends for coffee.
7. **Explain argument orally:** try communicating the thesis and argument to a friend or roommate without simply reading your paper, just from your head. Does it make sense to yourself as you say it out loud? Do they understand you? What questions to they have?
8. **Come back and re-read and revise.** First check if your own argument is clear and convincing. How does it demonstrate your mastery of the text? Then, finally, make sure to check for stylistic and grammatical errors.

### #5) SHORT PAPER #2

#### Summary and Analysis of Jonah Steinberg's article

“From a ‘Pot of Filth’ to a ‘Hedge of Roses’ (and Back): Changing Theories of Menstruation in Judaism” in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*

**Due:** Oct. 5 in class at 12:00pm.

**Length:** 350-400 words

**Late/Extension Policy:** requests for extensions will be considered up to 24 hours *before* the deadline for submission of work. If no extension is requested or granted a ½ grade taken off for each day late.

**Assignment:** The **first purpose** of this paper is to restate the argument of the text *in your own words* and to demonstrate your comprehension of the reading. What is the author's

argument? Simply identifying the main thesis of the text, and then detailing the various steps of the argument the author uses to come to that conclusion, should occupy 100% of your paper. NB: To restate the argument of the text *in your own words* means that you should only use quotes from the text sparingly, and when absolutely crucial. But you should still cite (parenthetically) the page of the text where you specific ideas from. Whenever you paraphrase something specifically, show where you are getting the idea from textually.

The **second purpose** is to analyze the article. In order to do this you must take a step back from the argument made and ask questions of it and the author. Some examples of analytic questions that it might be pertinent to ask are the following:

- To whom is the author speaking/writing?
- What is motivating the author? What does he/she want to convince you of?
- What is the author's starting point? What does he or she presuppose or assume?
- What is the genre of the text (sermon, letter, journal article, etc.)?
- What is the theoretical framework of the study? What counts as evidence?
- What kind of evidence is provided?
  - Supporting
  - Countering
- What are the implications of this argument, beyond the text? How does it connect to theories, ideas, texts, questions we've been introduced to in the class?

NB: *you will not have space to answer all of these so decide which one's are the most important in each case.*

## #6) SHORT PAPER #3

### Summary, Analysis and Evaluation of Carolyn Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*

**Due:** Oct. 16 in class at 12:00pm.

**Length:** 500 words

**Late/Extension Policy:** requests for extensions will be considered up to 24 hours *before* the deadline for submission of work. If no extension is requested or granted a ½ grade taken off for each day late.

**Assignment:** The **first purpose** of this paper is to restate the argument of the text *in your own words* and to demonstrate your comprehension of the reading. What is the author's argument? Simply identifying the main thesis of the text, and then detailing the various steps of the argument the author uses to come to that conclusion, should occupy 100% of your paper. NB: To restate the argument of the text *in your own words* means that you should only use quotes from the text sparingly, and when absolutely crucial. But you should still cite (parenthetically) the page of the text where you specific ideas from. Whenever you paraphrase something specifically, show where you are getting the idea from textually.

The **second purpose** is to analyze the article. In order to do this you must take a step back from the argument made and ask questions of it and the author. Some examples of analytic questions that it might be pertinent to ask are the following:

- To whom is the author speaking/writing?
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- What is the author's starting point? What does he or she presuppose or assume?

- What is the genre of the text (sermon, letter, journal article, etc.)?
- What is the theoretical framework of the study? What counts as evidence?
- What kind of evidence is provided?
  - Supporting
  - Countering
- What are the implications of this argument, beyond the text? How does it connect to theories, ideas, texts, questions we've been introduced to in the class?

*NB: you will not have space to answer all of these so decide which one's are the most important in each case.*

The **third purpose** is to evaluate it. Is this a persuasive argument? Why or why not? Is it original, interesting, provocative, significant, etc.?

## #7) GUIDELINES FOR RESEARCH PAPER (40% of final grade)

1. **Proposal and bibliography (Due Oct. 30; worth 5%):** State the topic you are interested in researching and your proposed bibliography. The topic should be stated in the form of a main question and series of sub-questions you need to answer to get to the primary question.
  - a. **Bibliography guidelines:** Minimum of 4-5 sources with at least 1 source from each of the following categories:
    - i. Book from an academic press
    - ii. Article from a peer-reviewed journal
    - iii. Primary source

Note: Blogs are not a legitimate source, nor is Wikipedia (though the latter can be a starting place for building bibliography).

2. **Thesis statement and outline (Due Nov.13; worth 5%):** State your thesis in *one simple and clear* sentence. Then give a point form version of how your argument will progress.
3. **Complete draft of paper (Due Nov.18; worth 5%):** The more complete this draft is the better. I will give you thorough comments on the draft, suggestions for improvement, and an estimate of what grade you'd get handing it in *as is*. My effort in giving you feedback will reflect your effort in the draft; the more effort you make, the more I will give to try and help you improve it.
4. **Final paper (due Dec. 11; worth 25%):** *Hand in with your draft paper with my comments on it.* If you fail to hand in both copies 5% of the final grade on the paper will be taken off. Style:
  - a. **8-10 pages, 12 pt font** (2000-2500 words). Include word count.
  - b. **Title page:** Title, my name, your name.
  - c. **Bibliography:** Properly cite your sources within the paper using Chicago Manual Style footnotes (see library reference if in doubt: <http://citesource.trincoll.edu/chicago/>) with a corresponding Bibliography at the end of the paper on a separate page.