The Weekly Reader

Teaching and Learning Center (TLC)

3-21-2016

Boredom Busters: Helping Our Students Become Better Critical Readers by Confronting Pseudo-Boredom

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Recommended Citation

Bird, John and Teaching and Learning Center, "Boredom Busters: Helping Our Students Become Better Critical Readers by Confronting Pseudo-Boredom" (2016). *The Weekly Reader*. 93.
https://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/weeklyreader/93

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Boredom Busters: Helping Our Students Become Better Critical Readers by Confronting Pseudo-Boredom

In the last issue, I mentioned a short article in the *Tomorrow's Professor* newsletter from Stanford, about engaging students in difficult reading, despite their claims of boredom. "Boredom Busters," by Jennifer Fletcher, talks about the difference between true boredom and "pseudo-boredom," a term she takes from composition scholar Charles Bazerman. As Bazerman explains, "Genuine boredom occurs when you are reading material you already know only too well….Pseudo-boredom comes when you feel you just cannot be bothered to figure out what all the new information and ideas mean." That statement really rang a bell with me, and I think it might ring a bell with many of us.

Fletcher talks about giving her students something to read that she is very excited by and engaged with—Thoreau's *Walden* and Edward Said's *Orientalism*. As she says, "the students make a good-faith effort to dutifully read what I've assigned for about five minutes. Then it starts: the shifting, the sighs, the slumping, the cell phones. *I* know that what I've distributed is life-changing, electrifying material that should rivet my students' attention to the page. *They* look like they've been in line at the DMV for days – exhausted, resigned . . . broken. This is not the face of engagement."

I know that response well!

Fletcher's point is that the students are not experiencing true boredom, but pseudo-boredom. In Bazerman's terms, they "cannot be bothered to figure out what all the new information and ideas mean." They *say* they are bored, and they truly think they are bored, but they can only be bored by what they already fully understand.

She cites scholars from The Boredom Research Group (real name), who give a fuller definition: "Whereas the academic boredom associated with overchallenging situations can produce complex feelings of anger, anxiety, hopelessness, and shame in some students, the boredom induced by underchallenging tasks simply results in low levels of enjoyment."

Her job as an instructor, Fletcher says, is "to alert my students to these situational differences in meaning. One of the ways I've tried to help my students distinguish between real boredom and 'fake' i.e., academic) boredom is through a metacognitive approach to academic reading that asks students to notice when they're feeling tired, disengaged, confused, frustrated, and disinterested, and then to apply a 'fix-up' strategy to deal with the source of boredom. In other words, I try to train students to develop their 'radar' for situations that might trigger defensive boredom. The goal of this approach is improved self-awareness,

"*As you might be able to tell, I am very excited by this distinction between boredom and pseudo-boredom. I can imagine the kinds of responses my students will have when I confront them with these concepts. I think it can potentially be life-changing for them to understand their cognitive reactions when they are confronted by difficult academic reading.*"

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persistence, and personal responsibility."

She gives her students a survey that asks them to respond to a number of statements, noting whether they agree or disagree. For example, "The best way to handle confusion is to just keep reading." "It's not fun to do something until you're good at it." "I often feel sloppy when I try to read academic texts." "Reading textbooks is boring." Then she and her students discuss their responses, revealing their hidden assumptions about reading. As she says, "The important point for students to understand is that academic boredom is a response to tasks that feel too hard, not too easy." (The full survey is included in her appendix.)

Fletcher shares her "Top 10 List of Things Students Really Mean When They Say, 'I'm Bored,'" which I find very insightful and provocative: 10. I don't want to work this hard; 9. I'm confused; 8. I don't have a purpose for reading; 7. I've never done this before; 6. I don't have any questions I want answered; 5. I'm tired or hungry; 4. I'm preoccupied with something else; 3. I don't

feel like I'm very good at this; 2. I don't see the connections between this activity and future learning or work; 1. I have another agenda.

She includes a list from Nell K. Duke and P. David Pearson that outlines what makes a good reader: "Good readers are active readers; good readers have clear goals in mind for their reading; good readers typically look over the text before they read; good readers read selectively, deciding what to read carefully, what to read quickly, what not to read, what to reread, and so on; good readers monitor their understanding of the text, making adjustments in their reading as necessary; good readers read different kinds of text differently."

Finally, she suggests to her students that they stop reading when they become confused and use one of the following fix-up strategies: "Survey the text again; reread; write about your confusion or questions; talk to a friend and/or your teacher; take a walk or eat a snack; check your predictions; read the introduction or preface to find a purpose for reading."

Here is the link to the whole article: https://tomprof.stanford.edu/posting/1469

As you might be able to tell, I am very excited by this distinction between boredom and pseudo-boredom. I can imagine the kinds of responses my students will have when I confront them with these concepts. I think it can potentially be life-changing for them to understand their cognitive reactions when they are confronted by difficult academic reading.

Critical reading is at the core of our students' experiences at Winthrop. We emphasize critical reading in the General Education Core: WRIT 101, HMXP 102, and CRTW 201. But critical reading should be a central part of almost all our courses.

You can find my handout, "How To Read Critically," on the TLC Resources page. If you do not already use that handout in your classes that involve reading, I highly suggest that you do. As I learned long ago, if I assume that my students are reading class assignments critically, I am just kidding myself. And from now on, I am going to make sure they realize that they are not really bored when they can't engage with the reading.

Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging, timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

If you have a request for a session you would like to see, please email me and I will try to arrange it. And if you have a session you would like to present, please email me. We will set something up as soon as we can!

The 3rd Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning

Many thanks to everyone who attended and presented at our conference on Saturday, February 6. We had 102 attendees, who heard excellent presentations and an inspiring keynote speech by Dr. Dan Mahony. Special thanks to Dana Bruneau for her work in organizing the conference.

A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The TLC for several years has been offering a service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

Go2Knowledge—Learning On Demand!

Go2Knowledge is a website that offers a variety of video presentations on faculty and staff professional development. You will find presentations by nationally-known experts in seven categories: At-Risk Populations, Campus Safety, Organizational Development, Student Success, Teaching and Learning, Technology, and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a one-year subscription to this service.

People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: http://www.go2knowledge. org/winthrop See you there!

Thought For the Week

Don't explain your author; read him right and he explains himself."
--Mark Twain