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Guest Column: Helping Our Students Read (and Understand) Difficult Texts—by Katarina Moyon, HMXP Director

This week, a guest column from Katarina Moyon, Political Science and HMXP Director.

It seems trite to say, but sometimes the truth behind what we do in educating our students is revealed in the most ordinary classroom moments. Recently my honors Human Experience (HMXP) class was covering Paul Tillich's "What Faith Is." It was the 13th week in the semester, and by and large this class had applied themselves to the texts, completed their assignments, and many of them truly tried to engage in classroom discussion. But something was missing that day. After looking at the author's background, defining some of the key terms, and focusing on key paragraphs, students still couldn't seem to engage the text to answer some mid-level questions.

I paused, debating with myself about slogging on or trying to get to the core of what was happening. Had they stayed up

watching what was happening on the streets of Paris? Gone to a party? Not prepared? I decided to find out. The students were required to do a journal entry, and I could see they had them in front of them, so I knew that they were at least minimally prepared. After I posed a few questions, students began to explain how difficult this reading was for them. They talked about how even after all of their preparation they still did not think that they understood what Tillich was trying to argue.

Aha, now this was something I could understand and help them with. I abandoned my list of questions and instead we looked at the first paragraph of the text. We parsed the meaning of each paragraph in the essay. We made sure they understood each sentence before moving on to the next one. We wrote notes in the margins, we looked up words, we talked through sentence structure and ideas, we even

considered Tillich's native German as an influence on his writing. In the end students were almost giddy with relief, making comments like, "well that was tough, but now I get it" and "that really helped."

I asked them if it was the hardest text that they read in our class this semester. It turns out that it was not. They listed at least three others that they had found just as challenging. We talked about the methods we employed to get through this reading for full understanding. This was NOT the first time we had discussed these methods, but it was the first time we sat down and comprehensively used them during our class time. We talked about how students could use these methods to get through their readings in other classes. And I think (I THINK) maybe, for the first time this semester they really appreciated the value of reading critically. After all of this, we briefly considered Tillich's ideas and how they might apply to our thinking today, which was my original goal for the class period.

“The tools we are giving our students in HMXP and in the General Education Core are those that will help them in every one of their classes at our university. Next time your students have difficulty with the subject matter of a text, ask them to do a line-by-line reading of the material. Ask them to put a paragraph into their own words. Ask them where the author’s main argument is or what metaphors are being employed. These are skills that they are learning in reading critically in HMXP.”



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Did I achieve what I planned during the class period? No, I did not. Would my slogging through the material have helped my students’ comprehension of Tillich’s ideas? Yes. But I would have done the work for them. After the class period I realized two things: 1) I am fooling myself if I think that my students are showing up to class with a high level of understanding of what they were supposed to read each time. 2) Our “derailed” class period may have been more valuable than any other class this semester. Since the first day of class we have been talking about reading critically and students have been taking appropriate actions to implement critical reading.

But it turns out that, after all of the effort, they still did not really understand how to wrestle with the most difficult things I was giving them to read. I believe that most of our students want to do well in their classes. But many of them struggle with how specifically to achieve success. This requires direct intervention on our part. We must show them the way. Sometimes that is through actions rather than words. We all wrestled with Tillich that day, and I am pretty sure we all broke a sweat.

They now know how to take on the next challenging reading.

The tools we are giving our students in HMXP and in the General Education Core are those that will help them in every one of their classes at our university. Next time your students have difficulty with the subject matter of a text, ask them to do a line-by-line reading of the material. Ask them to put a paragraph into their own words. Ask them where the author’s main argument is or what metaphors are being employed. These are skills that they are learning in reading critically in HMXP.

I am filled with an even higher level of appreciation for the people who envisioned HMXP as a course where we help our students achieve success through critical reading and grappling with deep ideas. This course compels them to try to understand points of view different from their own through reading challenging texts and then discussing them with their peers and writing argumentative papers about them. If our students do not fully comprehend what we are asking them to read in our classes, how can we ever expect them to

understand ideas, synthesize information, evaluate claims, and formulate coherent arguments? We are building the foundations required for the higher levels of thinking that we want all Winthrop graduates to achieve.

These skills and others that they learn in the General Education Core will also help them be better reporters, healthcare workers, business people, administrators, teachers and yes, even manual laborers if that is what they choose when they finish college. There are many people discussing the importance of critical thinking, reading, and writing these days, but rare is the public university that so wholeheartedly embraced its importance *and* developed a specific plan on how to teach it to its students. Our focused, direct attention to developing each of these skills in our students sets us apart from every other university in our state. And, most importantly, our interventions will help produce a more thoughtful and skilled generation, something I believe we will all benefit from in the future.

--Katarina Moyon

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!

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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

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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.

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Thought For the Week

"Thanksgiving Day. Let all give humble, hearty, and sincere thanks now, but the turkeys. In the island of Fiji they do not use turkeys; they use plumbers. It does not become you and me to sneer at Fiji."
--Mark Twain