

Ways of reading

Hi, I'm Mark Hoffer, the facilitator for this year's faculty learning community (FLC) on narrative. The previous issue of *fire* invited you to consider the roles that narratives of race do—and could—play in various college learning environments and institutional settings. In both that issue and the first, we have been presenting ideas about narratives and narrative forms. So in this issue, we are putting more focus on the activity of reading those stories. I have asked two of my FLC colleagues, Dr. Morenike Adebayo-Ige, from Reading, and John Toth, from English, to reflect on literacy and reading pedagogy in the college classroom.

In terms of larger narratives, of both institutional and cultural practice, we might want to keep in mind that reading, as a recognized “basic skill,” has occupied an increasingly tentative place, both in our own curricula and in colleges across the country. This is due, locally, to measures such as AB 705, but also to many factors. So as we share and present ideas and approaches below, we ask that you reflect on not only your own classroom practice, but also on the role you believe reading should play in our students' academic (and life) journeys.

The Efficacies of Narrative

Dr. Morenike Adebayo-Ige

In the Yoruba culture that I come from, especially around the time I was growing up, bedtime readings were not part of our lifestyles, but storytelling! I remember how we would sit around elders in the evenings (my favorite being on moonlit nights) to listen to stories (narratives) that forever molded our characters and thought process. Some of the pros of these narratives then and today are the ability to think critically (thinking out of the box, making connections or predictions, or drawing conclusions), language skills development (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), and more. My cultural background therefore enables me to challenge my students to travel with me on journeys that spur and provoke our thinking capacities, depending on the book we are reading. Most of the time, I begin my lessons with an anecdote to awaken my students' interests and imaginations.

For this year's Faculty Learning Community (FLC), we are reading Colin Dickey's *Ghostland: An American History in Haunted Places*, which reminds me of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and another classic I recently read with my students in Read 099, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. A commonality in my opinion with these books is how the religious and political leaders of those times used their positions to oppress the poor and vulnerable, while amassing popularity and wealth for themselves.

Themes such as these form the basis of our discussions (in pairs, small groups, and the entire class) and written responses, which are usually connected to current issues locally, nationally, and sometimes internationally. Moreover, my students and I learn about other cultures and value systems during our “readers' responses” time—when each person teases out something that stands out to him or her and why. Since these activities are either written or verbally shared, they encourage and strengthen students' language and thinking skills.

Another learning point for us is building our vocabulary skills. To have a good command of words requires that we learn words contextually as opposed to learning them in isolation, which only promotes rote learning—a faster way to forget things. A learning tool we have found very useful is the KIM (Keyword, Information, and Memory) Chart:

K (Keyword)	I (Information)	M (Memory)
(Row 1)		

This chart can be used when students identify unknown words from a text. Here is how it works.

Students create a table with three columns. The number of rows will depend on the number of unfamiliar words identified. The first column where all unknown words are listed stands for “K” (Keyword). The second column “I” (Information) will contain details on each word, such as part of speech, contextual meaning of words from the dictionary, quotes of the sentence where the word was originally used in the text (with page number), plus any other information the student may find useful in learning the word. We should also consider text type or discipline, since some STEM classes may find adding roots, prefixes, or suffixes to this column useful, as words can be broken

into meaning chunks. The final column is “M” (Memory), and it requires that students draw an image or picture of something that can help them recall the unfamiliar word. Since our experiences in life differ, the choice of images will also differ, but what matters is whatever will help each student to own the word by using it in writing and speaking. In this column also, students construct their own sentences using the vocabulary word but ensuring that the sentence is structured correctly to retain the original part of speech. Finally, in the “M” column, the student re-writes the word to master spelling and the transcription for correct pronunciation. The beauty of the KIM Chart is that each user (professor or student) is able to determine the amount of details needed.

Reading strategies and storytelling alike have the power to increase our abilities to think critically and to improve our vocabulary repertoire, for all kinds of communication. And they help bring our students closer to the academic, career, and life successes we all desire for them.

And So We Read On (Again)

John Toth

In 2016, *Smithsonian* magazine reported the findings of a Pew Research Institute nationwide survey: 27% of Americans had not read a single book in the past twelve months. And a 2018 *Washington Post* article reported that only 19% of the population reads for pleasure on a given day—down from 28% in 2004. With reading for pleasure on the decline, and over a quarter of Americans not finishing a single book in a year, the chances of a second or even third visit to the same text seems highly unlikely. With the proliferation of technology offering more innovative and immediately gratifying choices, many would question what can be gained by returning to ground that has already been covered.

A lot, it seems, according to Maureen Corrigan, a Georgetown English professor and book critic for NPR’s *Fresh Air*. In her recent work, *So We Read On*, she examines the creation of *The Great Gatsby* (which she contends is *the* Great American Novel), its enduring popularity, and her own personal history with the work. Throughout her study, she extols the virtues of repeated encounters with a text. Her title is a reference to the last paragraph of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel—which suggests the unbound optimism of Americans and their continual, obsessive striving for that which is always just out of reach—but it also speaks to the power of recursive reading. Corrigan’s title echoes Fitzgerald’s exquisite language, but *So We Read Again* might be more apt.

Corrigan admits that her first encounter with *Gatsby* in high school failed to leave an impression, yet she has become convinced of the novel’s perfection—perhaps due to rereading it, by her count, over fifty times. And she is not alone. When barnstorming the country to promote the novel through the Big Read program, she hears over and over from those reintroduced to *Gatsby* that it is better than they remembered it. Coincidentally, the printing history of *Gatsby* also suggests the need for a second chance. Corrigan reports that the first printing in 1925 was met with disappointing sales, just over 20,000 hardback copies—due in part to mixed reviews from critics. In fact, before Fitzgerald’s death in 1940, the book had almost disappeared. Corrigan relates that while living in Hollywood, when Fitzgerald would go into bookstores to buy copies for friends, he was often greeted with blank stares from booksellers who were surprised that he was still alive. It was only after World War II—and Fitzgerald’s death—when 155,000 Armed Services Editions of the novel were distributed to GIs in 1945 that the book began to achieve its amazing popularity.

Corrigan also approaches the merits of subsequent readings from a different angle. As she visits classes at her former high school where *Gatsby* failed to leave its mark, she wonders about the appeal of the novel to teenagers, questioning whether high school students know enough about regret and loss to allow them to appreciate the novel. Yet she comes to understand *Gatsby*’s multidimensionality and its multigenerational appeal: she concludes that it is a novel that can be appreciated by those who are older and more careful and also the young and reckless. Indeed, one of the pleasures of reading a great work of literature at various times in one’s life is that it speaks to different experiences, different sensibilities.

Corrigan’s premise certainly resonates with instructors who teach a novel or foundational text over many semesters or years. Typically, the works that we teach most are the ones for which we have the most appreciation. Yet often it is not a simple matter of teaching the works we like, but rather that we admire and more fully understand a text due to persistent study. After a class discussion of a work, my students have been known to wonder why on a first reading they missed so much. The truth, I tell them, is that the layers of meaning of a text seldom reveal themselves simultaneously, but typically are peeled back slowly through continual reexamination. For our students to be truly educated, it is not enough for them just to be able to read well, but also to appreciate the value of repeated readings. **f**