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# The Simplest Course I Ever Taught



James O'Brien for The Chronicle Review

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**I**n my 35 years of teaching English, I have come to see many undergraduates as skeptical learners, especially with regard to the humanities. Their initial response is to question and even

resist what we want to teach them. "How much time will the reading take?" they ask. "Why do I have to do it?" "Will this be on the exam?"

The key to engaging these students is not a matter of how much reading we sling at them, but how strategically we assign and discuss the material. Consider the analogy of cooking a live frog: Put the frog in boiling water and he'll jump out at once; gradually turn up the heat and he'll stay put and get cooked. If I raise the heat on the reading in a course very slowly, students get cooked (i.e., hooked) without knowing it.

I call this pedagogy "slow teaching." In the honor's college at my university we have introduced a set of courses that employ this method. They look closely — and, by extension, slowly — at one major text or idea over the course of 10 weeks. Some examples: Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, Ford's *The Searchers*, Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

These courses have been a revelation. They have created a climate of joy in the classroom, allowing everyone to relax and savor the subject matter. They have also helped me to reassess the motives and methods of my past teaching. For most of my career, I felt obliged to be "comprehensive": to

cram in as much material as possible over the course of a term. I directed my attention at students like myself — driven overachievers — and was dismissive of those for whom literature was a footnote to other things.

But good teaching is about abandoning this kind of vanity; it means seeing all students as equally valuable and capable of delight in the material. This requires slowing down — both to relieve the pressure of voluminous assignments and to allow time for students who are less immediately drawn to the subject matter to get their bearings.

This past fall, I took the slow teaching approach to a new level. It began when chatting with a group of students about Jane Austen. They all professed to love her, but as we continued to talk, I found that most knew her only through movie and television adaptations. They were a bright, curious group, but had found Austen's writing, when they had tried to read her in high school and college courses, too dense and difficult. How sad this seemed to me. And so I decided to offer a one-credit course: "Reading Jane Austen Aloud."

**F**or an hour each week I read *Pride and Prejudice* to the class, stopping occasionally at the end of a chapter to explain a reference or supply a context: the meaning of "primogeniture" and "entail"; the lower status attached to being "in trade"; the difference between Bingley and Darcy's class position. I never had such a rapt audience.

As the term progressed, I began assigning reading to be done at home. Those who had once been stymied by Austen's language now said reading her had become much easier. During class, I began to stop reading aloud and spend longer periods discussing the characters and situations. The course began to be more like a traditional seminar, though the students seemed more personally engaged and gave me more insight than usual into their beliefs and values.

There was, for example, general support for Charlotte's decision to marry Mr. Collins ("It's better to be with a fool and have some control over your life than to work as a governess and be invisible in someone else's house"), and sympathy for Mrs. Bennet ("Given the society of the time, it's her job to get her daughters married, and she applies herself to it!"). Students saw Mr. Collins's unwillingness to accept Elizabeth's refusal of his marriage proposal as a form of sexual harassment.

These students were pragmatists, but they were also compassionate

readers, able to go deeper than expected. In the end they could acknowledge Austen's genius but also critique the limitations built into her historical moment.

The course was a profoundly communal experience. It was the simplest course I ever taught but also among the best and certainly among the most pleasurable. Austen's wit and insight made us laugh, and students found that ideas formed spontaneously as they listened to her wonderful sentences.

"Reading Jane Austen Aloud" was admittedly an extreme case of slow teaching. It required both confidence in the approach (which others might label lazy or condescending) and a certain kind of mastery (one must know the novel well and be cognizant of not only how to read it with fluency and verve but also how and when to explicate or contextualize). It takes a certain bravado to embrace simplicity and ease, especially when you have been bred to respect complexity and difficulty.

I believe that all coursework, even in practical, content-dense fields like engineering, would profit from a dose of slow teaching. For this to happen, we would have to honestly evaluate what is necessary in the curriculum and what is only there owing to tradition or pride in one's own expertise. I am convinced that key concepts and texts will adhere better to memory and understanding if their presentation is slowed down — if we find a way to return to what first sparked our interest and delight in a given subject.

Ultimately, slow teaching, in whatever form it takes, is about reconnecting to the pleasure of a text or an idea, and of communing over it. Pleasure is a great motivator to learning.

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