

Reading and the “Graphic” (*National Geographic* That is!)

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Encouraging students to read is frequently an arduous task. The challenge confronting the ESL instructor is how to present reading using a combination of relevant context, and authentic linguistic and cultural input (Rounds 1992). Interpretive reading strategies employed by the ESL student may vary (Parry 1991), but the job at hand remains comprehension of and interest in presented subject matter.

As seasoned instructors, and for those embarking upon initial teaching appointments, we are cognizant that not every reading assignment will appeal to the individual reader’s palate. I generally strive to serve up readings of a mixed variety: the arts, science, environment, history, nature, family, education, and travel, for example. I vary the readings; in other words, I would not give a reading assignment in science for two successive class periods, although one science reading may require two class periods to do it justice. Yet what I seek in the readings I select are those of what I deem possess cross-cultural appeal and those that embody universal themes.

The students with whom I work are generally in the first year of college studies. The course in which I have successfully incorporated readings from the *National Geographic* is a remedial writing course comprised of both non-native and native speakers. Providing practical, relatively easy to obtain materials may be of more continuing concern for the ESL classroom instructor as well as for the mixed native and non-native speaker classroom teacher. In years past, I have had students read regularly from either *Time* or *Newsweek* magazines. These publications even have an educational program subscription package available with vocabulary and reading comprehension exercises. I have also used articles from *Scientific America* and *Science* magazines. I have even extrapolated material from *Parents Magazine*, a publication devoted to child-rearing and activities. I have also drawn articles from the *Smithsonian* magazine. I have not, however, used a magazine exclusively as a reading tool in the classroom, due in part to the students and department’s desire for a bona fide textbook. One advantage of introducing periodical articles in the classroom is that they can be much more current in profiling and updating aspects of subject matter since textbooks may require a wait of several years before ultimately being published.

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In the course of my endless search for supplemental materials, I have found that educational publications such as *National Geographic Magazine* address global and human interests. In addition, *National Geographic* profiles aspects of life both in the United States and abroad. Advanced level ESL students as well as native English speaking students are able to gain understanding of an article's focus through the synopsis which accompanies each photograph. Additionally, maps that convey historical information related to the pictures and articles are included in each issue (a loose foldout map also accompanies the journal in every second or third issue). Short, often one paragraph only articles, again illustrated with glossy photographs, are also published in *National Geographic*. Selective reading of a picture synopsis and/or short article can generate vocabulary, discussion, map work, and writing assignments both of a pre- and post- reading nature.

I encourage students to indulge in reading entire articles of the *National Geographic* and will provide them with a full-blown story, or direct them toward the library. However, most *National Geographic* articles tend to be quite scholarly in tone and approach, which in and of itself is not prohibitive; however, I also utilize a cross-cultural reading textbook in conjunction with the class. As a result, time constraints often prevent in-depth study of extended *National Geographic* pieces. More often than not, I have found that student interest in further pursuit of *National Geographic* is stimulated by initial presentation of and work related to pictures and accompanying synopsis, maps, and shorter articles within the confines of the classroom.

Since the classes I teach at IUSB meet twice a week, for one hour and fifteen minutes, I distribute an assigned reading at least one class period in advance. Sometimes the readings may consist of several short ones profiling diverse subjects such as an IMAX film of mountain gorillas, life in an ancient Anglo fort, and the Nike shoe-spill from the July 1992 *National Geographic*. A reading from the May 1994 issue was "Out of Darkness: Michelangelo's Last Judgment", from which the photograph/synopsis "A matter of modesty: censoring Michelangelo" has been extracted. This work chronicles the artist's struggles over nudity in the Sistine Chapel frescos and is accompanied by photos.

With this in mind, I give the students free reign to undertake assigned readings outside of class in order to facilitate a more relaxed reading of the material at the individual's own pace. The students' ability to interpolate background knowledge while engaging in reading, and that their control of this process which has direct impact on their comprehension, has been termed metacognition (Block 1992), Metacognition is also simultaneously detaching oneself from the reading (Block 1992). I encourage students to read the assigned material several times at prolonged intervals before class, stressing that this way they will gain further insight and understanding about what they have read. I also

request that they note how their perspective regarding a reading may have altered after distinct study of the text. These varied views have enlivened classroom discussions, to say the least.

Upon commencing a reading, I urge students to merely highlight with a colored marker any words or phrases with which they may be unfamiliar. I used to give students vocabulary lists to accompany each reading. I subscribed to the notion that ESL readers should understand practically every word they devour. Yet over the years, I discovered that as frequently as I had attempted to forecast vocabulary trouble spots, students tended to focus only on those words which they apparently thought I had designated of primary significance. I now attempt to incorporate a more process-oriented approach that permits students to integrate cognitive and metacognitive resources rather than a content-based one that targets linguistic aspects in isolation (Block 1992). Finally, I have dispensed with vocabulary lists for advanced level students. I now leave it to them to discern which vocabulary they need to decipher. Proficiency in the target language occurs when the students process it and assert themselves through it instead of succumbing to the commands of its form (Widdowson 1994). I do, however, make it clear to students that I will assist them, though, if they cannot decode particular vocabulary.

There exists a definite correlation between the quantity of reading done by people and the number of words they know (Parry 1991). Students possess various strategies which may strongly affect the manner in which they learn new vocabulary (Parry 1991). During classroom discussion, native speaker students can often clarify specific vocabulary for the ESL students. This, in turn, aids in communication between native and non-native speaker students. When meeting with an ESL student who may have encountered troublesome vocabulary, I reassure him that vocabulary building demands work, and that I too am continually acquiring new vocabulary. The more continuous the connections and reviewing are, the more proficient the reader will become.

In preparation of engaging students in discussion regarding a selected reading, I jot down a brief outline of topics and sub-points. For example, to return to the subject of life in a fort in what is now northern England, circa AD 90, I initiated discourse regarding education. From there, I questioned the students about what they understood regarding education in the fort, based on the reading. Both the students and I pointed out that children wrote on bark, that they spoke and/or translated Latin, in this particular case, Virgil's *Aeneid*, that the accompanying picture indicated the children wrote in cursive style, and that possibly much of the pedagogical approach employed a rote system of learning. Class members expressed amazement that fort social life sometimes revolved around birthday celebrations in A. D. 90. Students also noted that parcels containing such mundane items as socks and underwear were included in the

correspondence over 1900 years ago. Perhaps the most provocative aspect of the reading occurred when I mentioned the ethics of archaeology and grave tampering. Heated exchanges ensued as we discussed death rituals among North American Indians, Asian views of ancestors, and exhuming bodies in general. Students have become quite passionate over the thought that one day they or their family members could be studied by archeologists of future generations, and their remains relocated.

In the case of the reading, “A matter of modesty: Censoring Michelangelo”, we first discussed who Michelangelo was, the nature of the Renaissance in what is now Italy, the system of patronage, censorship, and tampering with another artist’s work. This particular reading struck a nerve in the native-speaker students because of current controversy in the United States of public funding of art. Class members explained how the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C. has been involved in heated debate with lawmakers over the funding of art which some have deemed pornographic due to style and subject, and/or homosexual in theme. Several non-native speakers pointed out that their countries have also had a history of art, music, and theater censorship.

The class then explored and tried to define what connotes art. Students kept returning to the reading, focusing on Michelangelo’s problem with religious leaders, which also parallels the present day pressure religious lobbying groups exert upon the United States Congress.

The value of such discussion is transformed into the writing assignments students ultimately turn in based on these relatively short readings. Not only do they take a stand on issues discussed in the classroom, but they also attempt to include vocabulary and expand upon ideas brought up in the discussion. Once a chord has been struck within the students, they respond. For example, in the Nike shoe-spill story, students found humor in the drawing of the bird wearing mismatched Nike high tops. However, once I brought up the subject of culpability in the fact that 40,000 pairs of shoes went overboard into ocean waters, students themselves began worrying about marine life becoming permanently embedded inside the shoes, unable to escape. This, in turn, led to the subject of the Exxon Valdez oil spill off the coast of Alaska several years ago. In their writing assignments, students attempted to present suggestions and solutions for curbing maritime oil spillage and desecration of the aquatic environment by whalers and the use of nets in capturing sea life. Perhaps because the dramatic impact of environmental spoilage affects us in the present and in subsequent generations, students of diverse backgrounds and cultures find common ground in wanting to initiate action to save Planet Earth.

Map reading too usually elicits waves of excitement among class members. No matter if the map is of a region with which they are familiar or not,

students pour over maps to study, explain, imagine and illustrate. United States maps introduced early on in the semester help pave the way for student interaction. The native speakers in the class are often familiar with diverse parts of the United States. The non-native speakers, on the other hand, are either looking forward to commencing travel in the States, or have at least visited areas where a large concentration of compatriot native speakers live such as Los Angeles, Chicago, New York and Miami. I have noted, however, that both native and non-native speakers tend to have an interest in the western portion of the United States, particularly North and South Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming. When I quiz students about their interest in those particular states, they mention ranches, cowboys, big skies and movies they have seen. I infer from this that the myth of the romanticized West is still alive.

“U. S Parks: Stretched Thin” and its accompanying map are taken from a much longer article entitled “Our National Parks” in the October 1994 *National Geographic*. I initiated class discussion by inquiring how many of the students had visited national parks, and which one(s) they had experienced. The next question was whether or not students had been to state parks. I inquired if anyone had gone camping and/or followed nature trails. From that point, class discussion continued virtually non-stop. Class members related brief anecdotes about national and/or state park experiences, family and/or friends who accompanied students on the excursion(s), and their impressions in general of parks. Referring to the map, students pointed out which national parks they had traveled to and mentioned the names of states they had driven through to reach their destination(s).

We then turned our attention to problems confronting the National Park Service such as vandalism and physical attacks by humans (not the wildlife), excessive tourism, funding shortages and pillage. The follow-up writing assignment was to offer solutions for U. S. parks’ woes. Again, since almost all of the students had at least taken advantage of even a city park, the hardships facing our very public natural preserves concerned class members. Several non-native speakers expressed bewilderment as to why North Americans would consider desecrating a national park site by pillage. Native speakers, in turn, explained that North Americans often wish mementos of sites visited, yet they did not condone the idea. This led to the notion of “souvenir-taking” of towels, pillows, pictures and ashtrays from hotels in the United States. Several students voiced their experience with tourists absconding goods from cabin camp sites, which returned us to the notion of park preservation.

I find that students generally take the initiative with map reading. Often a student wishes to relate his travels in a particular region, say the South, and he will orally trace his route for other class members. Questions are voiced by the others, and I usually find that I can easily fade into the background during map

time. Directions, routing, pronunciation, and culture points converge over map discussions. The follow-up writing assignment may incorporate subjects related not only to travel in general, but to specific rites, customs, and cuisine indigenous to a certain region, area, city or people.

Instead of giving a specific writing topic after discussing a *National Geographic* subject, I sometimes ask students to generate a paragraph about an aspect of the article or class discussion that made an impression on them. Students then work on developing a topic sentence for a paragraph in class, subsequently, writing the paragraph outside of class. I subscribe to the notion that teachers must be aware of the relationship between writing assignments they create and the effects implicated in student responses to these assignments (Winer 1992). For writing of an essay nature, I have students break into groups of four or five. They then collectively brainstorm for topics which inspired them in the course of several readings. Usually, the students have several short *National Geographic* works and two or three textbook readings from which to generate topics. Student groups must offer statements relevant to the readings. These statements may, in turn, ultimately serve as a thesis statement of the essay. After the groups have submitted their written topic statements, we as a class determine which statements may have duplicated themselves, which may be combined, or even eliminated entirely. Students often concoct writing topics that reflect an idea gleaned from the *National Geographic*

In short, there are certainly magazines and journals of literary merit to employ in the classroom. Selection of which periodical and articles to choose depends a great deal on needs, subject and availability. The caliber of writing students that I teach, coupled with the mixture of native and non-native speakers, has turned my attention more and more toward *National Geographic*, which is available only through subscription.

Not only have I opted to view the *National Geographics* a supplemental classroom resource tool, I also value the fact that its writing is of a consistently high caliber. Yet I feel compelled to acknowledge that *National Geographic* seems to attempt to translate other exotic cultures into Western mentality and thought. Its photographs frequently try to present what could be loosely termed “the more marginal cultures” as museum artifacts that must be preserved, rather than as indigenous cultures of another mentality. However, in spite of my view that *National Geographic*’s cultural slant may not always be truly authentic, I do feel the publication does try to incorporate something different into Western culture, although slanted toward exoticism.

For these reasons, and because my students embody various cultures and backgrounds, I make a concerted effort to extract readings devoted almost exclusively to the United States, unless a subject such as “A matter of modesty:

censoring Michelangelo” appears. Its theme reverberates loudly today in the United States as the government and public attempt to define the very nature of art itself. I further admit that I do manipulate the reading material in the areas of selection and initial discussion topics in order to contour the focus so that the majority, if not all students, may participate.

While it is true that I design my own questions and writing topics, and have students brainstorm for essay topics, I have discovered that advanced non-native and native speaker students respond more readily orally and in writing to ideas based on *National Geographic* readings. I do not have statistics or charts and graphs to prove this; I am only cognizant of it through my years of teaching composition coupled with reading and vice-versa. To illustrate further, the excerpt “A matter of modesty: censoring Michelangelo” precipitated a discussion about censorship of art, what art is, whether or not censorship of the arts is possible or justifiable, and who Michelangelo was, what the Sistine Chapel represents, and art in religious dwellings. The students cited the text to help draw comparisons between controversial situations in public funding of art today in the United States and the system of patronage during Michelangelo’s lifetime. I believe the students can sense the depth of a reading, even if it is one which may not initially appeal to them.

In conclusion, my methods and means of teaching reading and writing have undergone an evolution, perhaps even a revolution from the point at which I started teaching nearly fifteen years ago. At those moments in my professional life when I seriously contemplated forsaking teaching entirely, a nerve within seemed to trigger a catharsis and lead me to explore fresh paths to reinvigorate myself in the classroom. Sometimes I think that I must reinvent myself as a teacher in order to stimulate students tuned in to a television and video technologically-oriented sphere. I find myself continually searching for classroom materials. Yet I am full of hope for my students and myself. My fondest wish is that others are too.

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