

Education Unit, Developmental English

I came back to teaching ENG 91 in Fall 2014 year after five years without teaching it—and none too soon, given the curricular changes! During my five-year hiatus from 91, I taught a few semesters in the ESL Intensive program. The selected readings on education stem from a combination of the liberal arts-oriented ENG 91 I taught 5 years ago and the education unit in the ESL intensive class ... as well as some more recent discoveries. Although some of the texts are quite challenging, I think this group of readings would work well in an ENG 93 course. With the exception of the Schulberg, Nemerov, and Schumacher, all are available on the web (I'm happy to provide hard copies of the others to anyone who is interested).

The unit is particularly useful at the beginning of the semester, because (1) it puts the question of what students hope to gain from their educations on the table from day 1, and (2) memoirs are a nice ice-breaker (later in the semester, we want to be moving students toward more academic/expository pieces).

Texts:

- Plato, *The Allegory of the Cave* (dialogue)
- Mortimer Adler, "Schooling Is Not Education" (essay)
- Frederick Douglass, "Learning How to Read and Write" (memoir)
- Malcolm X, excerpt on learning to read from the *Autobiography* (memoir)
- [Budd Schulberg, "The Wonderful Lousy Poem" (memoir)]
- Mark Twain, "Two Views of the River" (memoir)
- Alan Lightman, excerpt from *A Sense of the Mysterious* (memoir)
- [Howard Nemerov, "Learning the Trees" (poem)]
- [Richard Feynman, "The Amateur Scientist" (from *Surely You Must Be Joking*) (memoir)]
- Walt Whitman, "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" (poem)
- [E. F. Schumacher, excerpt from *Small is Beautiful* (essay)]

Comments:

Each of these readings addresses education differently, and there are myriad connections students can make between them.

The Allegory of the Cave is an excellent place to start, because it serves as a framework for students to discuss the readings that follow. "Inside the cave," "outside the cave," and "the journey out of the cave" become metaphoric shorthand for discussing "the effects of education and the lack of it," as Socrates describes the meaning of the allegory, in the readings that follow. In addition, the cave is a wonderful place to start because it brings up the issue of the concrete versus the abstract—a key issue for active reading!

Adler, Douglass and X, and to a lesser degree Schulberg and Twain, connect beautifully with the Plato. My 91 students were particularly fascinated by Douglass, who

educates himself only to realize his own enslaved condition, and remain in (actual) fetters. Adler, who describes becoming educated as a lifelong enterprise and a hard road, also ties nicely.

For Twain, education, here in the practical matter of piloting a boat, begets responsibility, and the innocent, naïve, poetic eye must be superseded by the experienced, practical one. The sense that something is lost through education connects well with (for example) Douglass. Twain also serves as a nice segue into the Lightman and the Whitman. These latter three texts—Twain, Lightman, and Whitman—assert differences between the poetic and practical sensibilities, with the scientific oscillating between the two poles (depending on the author).

The readings in brackets are also excellent, though they don't fit quite as neatly into the pattern of ideas. Schulberg's essay is about learning to write, and the alternate forces of inspiration and criticism that drive a person. It has worked really well with ESL students, and I imagine it would work equally well with native speakers. Feynman's is about the scientific mind and scientific inquiry, and forms a particularly nice counterpart to Whitman's poem. Schumacher is about what people desire in through education. And the Nemerov is a lovely sidelight on the poetic and scientific mindsets. (FYI, the only text I've never taught is the Nemerov.)

If anyone has any other suggestions for education unit texts, particularly aimed at developmental students, please add them!