

Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series

Bonus Episode with Jenny Davidson: How Much Reading Is Enough?

Center for Teaching and Learning, Columbia University

Catherine Ross ([00:00](#)):

Hello, and welcome to Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning, a higher education podcast from the Center for Teaching and Learning at Columbia. I'm Catherine Ross, the center's Executive Director. Let's get started. In the second part of our conversation, Jenny and I discuss dead ideas around academic rigor and the use of both extensive and intensive readings in literature classes.

Catherine Ross ([00:37](#)):

So I want to make a little room here for another dead idea that you mentioned that was related to disciplinary expectations in the realm of literature and reading, critical thinking around those texts. You had mentioned that there is a prevailing idea in higher education. And of course, I wonder if this is another dead idea that academic rigor somehow equals more, right? The more reading students do, the more writing they do, the more content they cover, the more rigorous the courses. And you're saying, no, not exactly. Do you want to elaborate on that?

Jenny Davidson ([01:24](#)):

I think that this isn't an either/or question. I think that there are times when it is appropriate and necessary to read a lot, or to insist that we're reading a book in its entirety, but that there are other times where that's really not appropriate. And it's funny, the two seminars I was teaching this spring are the two different alternatives that you might think of with regard to how we teach long, difficult books to undergraduates and graduate students. I'm a little skeptical about the apocalyptic argument that nobody can read it anymore because smartphones and social media and everything made it impossible to concentrate. But it is clearly harder to carve out quiet space for uninterrupted, immersive reading than it was 25 years ago. We experienced that, have lived through that, who had it ourselves before and are now in the after. And I think in general, it would be fair to say about incoming PhD students now versus circa 1990, that they have spent less time in immersive reading than that earlier generation of students have.

Jenny Davidson ([02:35](#)):

So what that means to me is that we, as faculty and as long time readers... I'm in a very reading oriented discipline, this isn't generalizable to non-reading oriented disciplines. We need to help our students develop good reading habits. My instructions at the start of a semester always include, "Please try and read it in a room where your phone is not, and turn it off if just putting it face down isn't enough." It's a real temptation to go to your laptop and see what's going on, on your different social media sites. So we have to be mindful that it's harder to set up those barriers than it once was. There's so much more diversity in terms of entertaining things that we can experience.

Jenny Davidson ([03:24](#)):

So one seminar that I was teaching in the spring, it's a real favorite of mine. I've taught it five or six times now. An 18th Century novelist called Samuel Richardson wrote a novel called Clarissa that was really one of the great influential best-selling books of the century, in Europe as well as in England. Clarissa, or

the History of a Young Lady, is a novel written in letters. It is composed of several different correspondences, one between two young women, one between two young men. And they are arranged and interspersed in order to tell the tragic story of Clarissa, an exemplary young woman who was lured away from her family home by a highly manipulative man who turns out to be not just a would-be seducer but a rapist in every sense of the word, in the modern sense of the word, as well as the 18th century sense.

Jenny Davidson ([04:22](#)):

Now this novel, it's a riveting read in many respects. If you're a novel reader, you'll find it immersive. But it's written in an idiom of 250 years ago. And here's the thing, it is one million words long, right? That's how long it was. So you have a 13-week term at Columbia, and I decided a long time ago... I'm a fast reader and a voracious reader, especially of novels. I really do want to make the commitment to teach this novel in its entirety, not just for graduate students who are going to be specializing in this field, because I think it's one of the great long novels worth mentioning in the same breath as War and Peace. And the experience of immersing yourself in the world of a novel and all of the things that it makes you undergo during the protracted duration of reading. That is itself a fascinating subject of inquiry and something that my discipline is rightly concerned with.

Jenny Davidson ([05:30](#)):

So the first time I taught that class, I tried to sneak in one additional novel, this sort of anti-Clarissa, which is Laclos' novel, Dangerous Liaisons, the most brilliant and devastating undoing in certain respects of the arguments of Clarissa, although also a book that could not have been written without the precedent of Clarissa. Richardson was highly influential. And I realized, no, it was just too much. All we were going to be able to do this semester would be in the world of the novel. We would use it as a kind of encyclopedic guide to issues of widespread interest in 18th Century literature and culture. So we would use it to let us think about socioeconomic displacement of daughters and the kinds of distortion in families that tend to be represented in the novels of that period. And we would think about funerary practices and why a culture of mourning that Clarissa is involved with might seem pathological to us but was culturally prevalent, right?

Jenny Davidson ([06:39](#)):

We're using it to open up things like that. And we're also using it to open up questions about what it means to write a novel in letters rather than a novel with third person narration or first person narration, using the novel as a guide to the history of narratology, or the study of narrative. And that was plenty. So I have divided that novel up into 10 weeks. We use the additional classes to get a bit of a breather or catch up. Sad to say the Monday that classes were suspended was the day that we were meant to visit the Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Columbia and hold first editions of Tristram Shandy and look at how Clarissa was published versus other novels of the period, alas. So that's the one course, and that's both extensive and intensive reading.

Jenny Davidson ([07:32](#)):

We're doing a lot of close reading with individual passages, and I am committed to the idea that students, they may not be able to read the whole book during the time of the term, but they're going to be reading most of it. And I have some ways of helping them do that. I never would do this for another course because it would be too directive, but I've typed up the key passages from each of my 10 sections. And I distribute that as a handout and working sheet. And I ask students to make a promise to

me that if they fall behind, they will not try and catch up, that they will jump ahead to the new week's reading using the passages that I distribute as a way of making sure that they catch up. So that's that class.

Jenny Davidson ([08:14](#)):

The other class, I wanted to juxtapose two major and highly influential nonfiction books that in their very different ways are either providing a master narrative of European history and culture or undermining the very idea that we could provide a master narrative of that sort. The first one is Edward Gibbon's History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. And the second one is Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project, which if you have ever seen it is a huge, fat brick of a book. I'm not sure what the word length is. A collection of fragments, really something like an infinitely expanding file rather than any thing like a conventional narrative.

Jenny Davidson ([09:03](#)):

So what is it that makes me say that I would teach Clarissa in its entirety, yet I would not try in a classroom to teach Gibbon's History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire in its entirety? Well, it's partly that it's not a novel. It's partly that the most influential parts of Gibbon's book can be thought of as a greatest hits. There's the early segments. That's what we really think of him writing about, which is to say from the reign of Augustus onward, the kinds of decadence and degeneration that came in as republic transformed into empire in those first couple hundred years.

Jenny Davidson ([09:44](#)):

And then there are some other sections of the book. For instance, his chapter on Muhammad and the spread of Islam that were very much talked about and that you might want to read from an intellectual history standpoint. But the whole history is about one and a half million words long, so half as long again as Clarissa. So it's not a novel. You definitely could not ask even graduate students to read it all in a 13-week term. It's not realistic. It's not cognitively realistic to take in so much, right?

Jenny Davidson ([10:19](#)):

And then there's been a tendency for people just to not really read Gibbon's history anymore because it's so long. It's physically overwhelming. The three volume Penguin edition, it's like this huge... The pages are big, and there are more than a thousand pages in each of the three volumes. It's just overwhelming. But it seems to me absolutely self-defeating to just give up at that point. I think that there were ways that were prevalent earlier in the 20th Century. For instance, the popularity of abridged additions of things, right? It went out of fashion to read abridgments right. We casually looked down on Reader's Digest abridgments, forgetting in some ways the access that they provide for readers to these extraordinary works. You might not be getting a hundred percent of David Copperfield when you read the redacted version, but you are getting a lot of the essentials in terms of the storytelling and character development and themes and all of those sorts of things.

Jenny Davidson ([11:30](#)):

So in my opinion, in the academy, the sort of decline and the acceptability of excerpting for reading is associated with the rise of post-structuralism. That in the era of the Death of an Author and Barthes and Foucault thinking about texts and writerly texts rather than about authors and identities. If you're thinking about a text as opposed to a novel, it makes you want to... There's something scriptural about that. You want to have every single word. You want it not to be excerpting. So it's a different question.

How do you set up that reading so that you can share with students the essentials of these extraordinary books, two of the most amazing books I've ever read, without drowning them in reading? And I had a preliminary solution to that in the form of the syllabus that I handed out at the beginning of the semester.

Jenny Davidson ([12:22](#)):

But once the pandemic hit in a way that started to alter our daily lives and ways of being, it was clear to me that I needed to radically reconceive what that would look like. So what I did in the Clarissa class, I just needed to be... How would I put it? I just needed to be really supportive. I needed to say, "Come to class, even if you can't do the reading. Don't worry if you can't concentrate. We've got these handouts with the passages that we'll share. I'll make it really easy, and you'll get something out of it. And at some later point in life, when you can, you will finish reading this book." So that was what I did for the Clarissa seminar.

Jenny Davidson ([13:00](#)):

The other seminar, we just about finished doing Gibbon, and we were about to move into the Arcades Project and the associated Baudelaire and the other things you read with that material. And it was clear to me that when we're talking about densely written theoretical prose, as opposed to novelistic prose, that the degree of attention that remains for all of us was so much diminished that I was going to need to have a multi-tiered plan that even the most self-possessed grad students who were still in their same apartment in Morningside Heights and hadn't had a dramatic transformation like so many other students, that even they were very unlikely to be able to do the kind and amount of reading that I had set up at the beginning of the semester.

Jenny Davidson ([13:49](#)):

So the strategy that I developed for that class involved having three options for every week. So option one was obviously do nothing. Just come to class if you possibly can, and don't feel stressed about the fact that you haven't done the reading. You're allowed to come and not have done the reading and ask questions of things that are confusing. But the rest of us will all try and bring these texts and ideas to life in a way that will give you some takeaway, even if you haven't been able to read it.

Jenny Davidson ([14:20](#)):

Option two was a seriously stripped down level of the former readings, which I was lucky that I had taught the class once before. So I was able to use my old seminar notes to see what passages I had focused on, what sections of reading. And this was both the theoretical and practical response. It was both saying, "Okay, you have these three different things, and it would have been about 120 pages of reading. But I see that really I can boil it down to about 20. There's a poem from this, a two-page stretch here, and these five passages from one of the long sections of Benjamin." So I didn't just give them the new syllabus with that. I actually made a PDF each week where I scanned those and put them into a single packet. Because when we are really resource constrained, when we have no wherewithal... Everyone had their books, had access to their books still, but having to look in the different places and check the page numbers and so forth, I think that's a needless step.

Jenny Davidson ([15:28](#)):

And again, I wouldn't normally feel the need to do this in the teaching context that I am, but I thought I want someone to be able to open this PDF on their phone while they're lying in their bed in their

childhood bedroom, and just skim through it all there in one place. I want to absolutely reduce all the barriers their entering.

Jenny Davidson ([15:48](#)):

And then of course the third option was to do all the original reading as it was on the syllabus, but I felt that this was the only possible response to the situation. Now I will just sound annoying and pious, but I was shocked to hear from students, especially grad students, how many of their other graduate classes were loading on more work in the form of written responses and making no cutbacks to pages assigned as reading or the kind of reading, as well as the amount and so forth. So I don't want to upset anybody or call them out, but that was a failure of pedagogic sympathy that really was costly. It was costly in terms of students' mental health and wellbeing, and it was costly in terms of their trust going forward.

Catherine Ross ([16:43](#)):

So I think this speaks very profoundly to some things that Diane Pike mentioned in her podcast, which is the first podcast in this series, that teaching requires that we really, deeply understand where our students are in the world and how they see that world. And that it's on instructors to meet students at that place, and I think you just gave a fabulous example of that.

Catherine Ross ([17:16](#)):

And the other thing that strikes me about your comments around how you decide when to excerpt and why to excerpt is that you're still very focused. You're using the global picture of what is it they need to learn in this course? And how much content do I need or how much reading do I need for them to do to get to that learning? And the answer isn't always the same. And I think that's a really critical piece of pedagogical skill that you exhibit when you're making those kinds of decisions.

Jenny Davidson ([17:57](#)):

It's one of the really lovely things about teaching lyric poetry. So if I teach Emily Dickinson in the Intro to the Major, in a sense, well, I'd like them to read a poem a few times. But it's a 10 or 15 or 20 line poem. They could have read it a couple of times before class and then really read it deeply with me over 75 minutes in class. And that was all that they needed to do to learn that lesson, right? And this is this idea of intensive reading. Certainly in the case of something like Benjamin's Arcades Project, that's really gnomic and aphoristic in its mode, if you pick the right paragraph and sit with it as a group and really know that passage, that is going to be what a student's going to remember rather than having read too fast or too much material.

Jenny Davidson ([18:50](#)):

So it's an important part of my teaching in my department lecture courses as well. I often teach the Introduction to the Major. And in any class that I teach, I always say, "I would rather have you read fewer pages well than struggling through, skimming through, and only having the vaguest possible idea afterwards." So part of what I teach in the Intro to the Major is how to make those choices for yourself when you're reading for a class that doesn't give you advanced tips about where the places are to focus on, how to start being a more sophisticated reader of literary criticism especially, so that you... It's a crucial skill for college humanities students to be able to say, "I have 90 minutes that I can devote to this week's reading. Where do I direct my attention so that I will be well-prepared for class with that commitment of time and resources?" Right?

Catherine Ross ([19:53](#)):

Yes, that's truly profound. And I think at the core of the very best teaching that we can offer our students is how do we empower them as learners and help them understand that they control a lot and that they can develop the ability to make those kinds of decisions? And you're signaling trust in your students, that you trust them to be able to be in control of their own learning. And I think that's extraordinarily powerful for students. So this was fabulous. I just want to ask if you had any other thoughts or things you want to share with us before we sign off? I'm not sure, have you read any books on pedagogy that gave you these ideas? Or are these ideas that evolved from your own teaching? So anything you want to share with the audience-

Jenny Davidson ([20:53](#)):

This may sound funny, but my mother trained as a Montessori teacher when I was probably two or three, something like that. And so the first classroom that I was ever in was my mother's classroom. She was the Montessori co-teacher, and I was the student. And she reports a conversation that she overheard between me and another kid in the class, we were probably four or maybe five at the oldest. And the kids said, "Why do you call our teacher mom?" And I said, "Because she's my mother." And the other kids that, "She can't be your mother. She's our teacher."

Jenny Davidson ([21:29](#)):

But it is to say that I really grew up in the school more even than most people do, and I was a voracious reader with never enough to read. And there were the books, probably I was only seven or eight, that my mother had, had for her Montessori degree that were things like a formative book for me, Harlan Lamb's book about Victor, the Wild Boy of Aveyron, the deaf child who was taught to sign and emerged at a sort a pre-verbal state and so forth.

Jenny Davidson ([22:04](#)):

School always came really, really easy to me. I love reading and writing. You might not think it, but I love math and quantitative things and science. So it's more interesting being in a classroom as a student if you consider yourself to be responsible for everybody's learning, to do what you can at any rate, to be a productive helper of the teacher, rather than just focusing on your own learning or accomplishments and so forth.

Jenny Davidson ([22:35](#)):

So the school I went to made that ethos really comfortable. That was very much the style of learning that the elementary school at Germantown Friends practiced. So I was always with a meta eye on what the teacher was doing and whether it was really getting through to students, and whether there was some way that I could help students who hadn't understood things how to understand things better. So I feel that I've been immersed in this world of thinking about these questions from my very, very early, early memories.

Catherine Ross ([23:08](#)):

... Clearly you were a teacher, even as a child.

Jenny Davidson ([23:12](#)):

Indeed, I was. And it was probably pretty annoying some of the time, too

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Catherine Ross ([23:17](#)):

Well, it's fabulous for us, and we really appreciate you being here today. So thank you for sharing all of these experiences and ideas with us.

Catherine Ross ([23:29](#)):

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