

Teaching Portfolio Extract

Mike Cosgrave Phd History Dept, UCC¹

Reading History: Primary and Secondary Documents in Teaching

At university, students read for a degree. They don't 'take notes' for a degree, or, worse, 'xerox notes' for a degree, they read for a degree. We transmit knowledge from generation to generation and from place to place in written form. At Primary level children learn to read words and sentences, at secondary they learn to read and write paragraphs and essays (although that is increasingly open to debate) but in university they need to learn how to read complex arguments and present thoughtful analysis with clarity and precision.

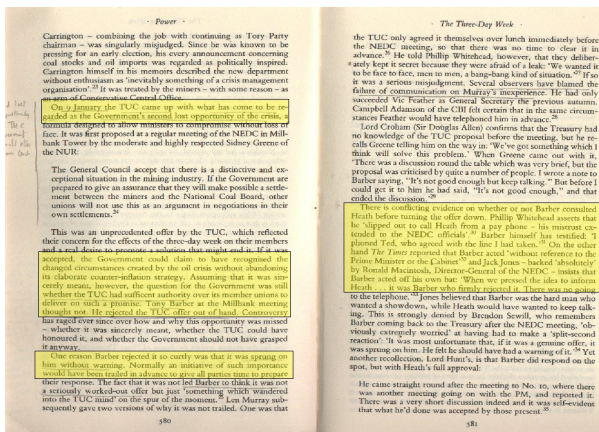


Illustration 1: Section of John Campbell's biography of Ted Heath, with key points highlighted for use on slide

clear, accessible text.

Reading documents – both secondary and primary texts – is a critical part of the professional formation of history students. Reading is also an essential part of any course – no lecturer would pretend that the lecture content alone provides an adequate depth of coverage for any course. Lectures are used for a variety of different purposes – outline, overview, introducing key debates and so on, and the expectation is that students will use this as a base to read around the topics. However, there is often a critical gap between the lecture and the reading, and a great many students fall into the gap and get lost.

This tallies closely with the disciplinary nature of History, and indeed of most humanities subjects, which are profoundly based on text. While history has moved past the 'fetishism of documents' to include other types of 'text', the bulk of what the historian does involves reading primary source materials, researching and analysing them, thinking critically about the patterns in the documents and seeing how they fit together, and presenting those results in

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In my teaching I seek to bridge the gap between lecture and reading, to show more clearly how the two link but bringing more of the reading into the lecture. Thus for example in post-war British political history (Hi3003) I make use of selections from both the memoirs of the participants themselves and from critical biographies as well as the growing range of secondary texts on the period. It can be argued that one can serve



Illustration 2: Part of Ted Heath's memoirs, with highlighting. There is a text block of notes in the upper left corner of the slide

the same purpose by simply picking out quotes and rectifying them in the lecture. However, it seems clear to me that you are achieving a qualitatively different result if you take a digital image of the relevant page and put it into your slides, highlighting the points you wish to emphasise. The quote which you wish to pick out as summarising neatly a key point does not exist in vacuum – it is often part of a long, often rambling and incoherent self-justification or argument. If students are going to learn to read political memoirs, then they need to see the whole page, and not just the incisive soundbites.

There are a variety of reasons for doing this. People do not usually fly off and act a radical tangents. People work by rationalising the actions within a narrative sequence of events, events driven on by choices made on the basis of decisions which were rational within their context, and intentional, not accidental. Historians work by discovering and making clear these patterns of human actions, and presenting them in turn as coherent narrative accounts. 'Soundbiting' quotes into lectures does not do justice to understanding the worldview of the original primary actor, the empathic recreation of the historian and does not show students how to engage with the texts to discover the flow and the highlights of the story for themselves. No course allows page by page reading of all the sources for a particular topic, but it seems to me that if we are going the students to read history, we need to take the time to show them examples of how it is written both by participants and professionals.



Illustration 3: Part of the Unit History of 42nd Infantry Bn, UNIFCYP, in a lecture on Peacekeeping in my 'War, State & Society' course

Placing the whole page before the class opens new dimensions of discourse. Perhaps the sentence you have picked out as a stunning turning point in the argument does not leap out the the students in a similar way. Perhaps there are contextual points which you are completely comfortable with, but which are foreign to students reading the page for the first time; problems which will only be exposed by taking 5 minutes to actually work through the development of an argument over a page or two. And occasionally, a student will pick out a sentence which you have not noticed, and ask if it isn't perhaps just as significant in the flow of the argument.

Equally useful is the manner in which ICT now allows us to bring primary documents directly into lectures in a way which was, even a decade ago, utterly impossible. (CAB papers) Some primary documents in twentieth century history are made available online as a matter of course, while the willingness of many archives to allow the use of digital cameras not only facilitates bringing primary source material directly into teaching.