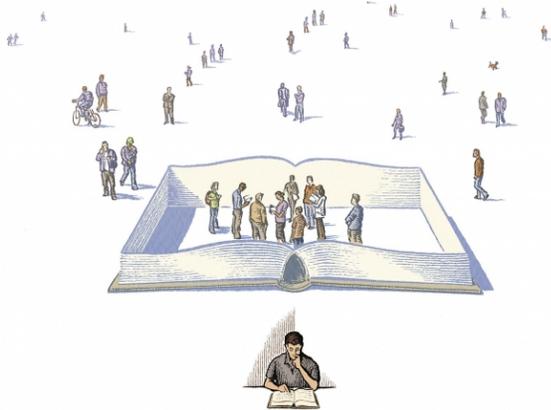




## THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

# Tackling Texts Alone



Christophe Vorlet for The Chronicle Review

By Mikita Brotzman | OCTOBER 23, 2011 ✓

PREMIUM

Faculty at my college—perhaps at all colleges—are encouraged, whenever possible, to forge links with the local community. While there is certainly no mandate that we create such connections, they are valued and rewarded, partly, I assume, because they are clearly

instrumental in the wider quest for college courses to have broader transparency and greater impact. The Maryland Institute College of Art has an Office of Community Engagement, which, according to the college Web site, is devoted to "collaborating with academic and community partners—locally and globally—in academically based endeavors that seek to improve lives and strengthen communities." A laudable aspiration, one might assume, given that commitment to community engagement "traverses every facet of the College, from the way we do business, to the academic programs we offer, to the extracurricular opportunities that are available to our students."

In most colleges, those teaching courses that cannot be tied directly to the wider community are urged to foster a sense of connection in the classroom by replacing old-fashioned lectures with student-friendly techniques such as classroom response systems (clickers), online discussion forums or chat rooms, classroom blogs, and student wikis.

In some kinds of courses, however, community initiatives, even in the classroom, can feel more like an imposition than an enhancement. Many of the courses taught in my

department, humanistic studies, demand a close, private engagement with difficult and weighty texts. Lectures and discussions can help place these works in their historical and cultural context, but a full understanding demands individual reflection and private judgment, qualities that can be cultivated only through the practice of careful reading, a practice that demands solitude. It cannot be taught in small-group, problem-solving activities, by fostering community action, or by promoting shared responsibility for active learning. In other words, some kinds of education demand that, instead of turning to one another, we must turn within.

That is not to say that the texts taught in these courses discourage the notion of community; on the contrary. But thinking about something is not the same as engaging in it, and a class in which the idea of community is taken seriously will not necessarily be a community in itself.

My colleague Saul Myers, who teaches courses on Joyce, Nabokov, Faulkner, and Kafka, believes that the authors of books like *Ulysses*, *Lolita*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *The Trial* are constantly questioning the role of the individual in society.

"Their protagonists are isolated in different ways from communities," Myers told me in an e-mail. "They stand out from their middle-class Irish community or from their American Southern one, even as they belong to it." Myers also teaches the works of philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Friedrich Nietzsche, who posit "certain conceptions of the human community, some they want us to get out of, and other kinds of community they argue that we should maintain or forge."

While Myers believes that such texts can have an important impact on the way students act toward the communities they find themselves in, their complexity demands a private engagement that often works against community building in the classroom.

By its very nature, this kind of textual engagement is a private rather than a shared experience. It does have elements that can be communal, but not in the usual, everyday sense of the term, and not without raising important questions about what the concepts of "communal" and "community" have come to imply.

Michael Sizer, a historian at MICA, teaches a Chaucer class where students are asked to



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"When we read Chaucer," Sizer told me in an e-mail, "we are re-enacting a community ritual, preserving precious and imperiled wisdom and beauty and making it live the life it is supposed to live as generations of college students have done in the past." Nowhere else, he wrote, do such community rituals occur except in the college classroom.

"Students will have plenty of time for community projects and other forms of 'applied knowledge' once they are in the workplace," he argued, suggesting that the kind of reading that takes place in his classroom is a communal activity that is not, at least not directly, "community building" in the more generic civic sense.

"I have always thought my teaching was my most powerful mode of social activism," he said, "but other people would (and do) think that is ridiculous."

I sometimes see the process of developing a private reading practice as similar to that of learning to play a musical instrument. Apprentice musicians may get pleasure from going to concerts, talking to others about their instruments, or writing a blog about their progress, but these activities can never replace the years of private practice, in between classes and lessons, when they slowly get to know the nuances and subtleties of music making. Even professional orchestra musicians need to spend time alone, practicing their individual parts.

This fall I am teaching a course on Joseph Conrad, an author whose style is notoriously difficult, and, to those unaccustomed to it, can initially seem long-winded and tedious. The books I've included on the syllabus all require a great deal of thoughtful private reading outside class. My students might be disappointed that I am not setting up a blog, taking them on a tour of a historic ship, or visiting the Baltimore maritime museum. Interested students can explore such options on their own; the 15-week semester, I feel, offers little enough time to spend with the books themselves, whose language deserves close scrutiny precisely because it can be disconcertingly complex.

That is especially true of *Heart of Darkness*, a book that, to some degree at least, is a tale of community disengagement. Ironically, if anything in this obscure tale is made more lucid by words, it is our inability to make one another understand our experiences—as

Conrad puts it elsewhere, to make one another truly see. (He also says that "words, as is well known, are the great foes of reality.")

Marlow, the protagonist, is not much of a storyteller (or so he claims), and yet he seems compelled to share his experiences in Africa with his listeners—or at least to make the attempt. The more deeply he gets involved in his narrative, however, the more difficult Marlow finds it to express himself. In the end, he begins to realize that we cannot, in fact, share our experiences with anyone else, coming to the final, disturbing conclusion that "we live as we dream: alone."

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