Fall 8-15-2012

ENG 2011G-002: Literature, Self, World: Fiction

M Leddy
Eastern Illinois University

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He sat on the edge of his bed with his elbows on his knees and scanned the stack of cartridges. Each cartridge in the dock dropped on command and began to engage the drive with an insectile click and whir, and he scanned it. But he was unable to distract himself with the TP (Teleputer) because he was unable to stay with any one entertainment cartridge for more than a few seconds. The moment he recognized what exactly was on one cartridge he had a strong anxious feeling that there was something more entertaining on another cartridge and that he was potentially missing it.

David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*

The technologist Linda Stone coined the term “continuous partial attention” to describe what ails us in the early twenty-first century: an increasing inability to give our full attention to any one thing for very long for fear of missing everything else that is out there (as if one could, really, “have it all”). Reading a big novel is, among things, practice in the art of paying attention.

In this course, we will undertake an extended adventure in reading with David Foster Wallace’s extraordinary 1996 novel *Infinite Jest*. It is difficult to describe this novel without giving too much away. The time is the near future. The principal settings are a prestigious tennis academy and a halfway house for recovering addicts, the one at the top of a hill, the other at the bottom. Among the many questions that the novel invites its reader to consider is this one: how are these two worlds connected?
line. That makes it easier for me to sort mail and respond to it in a timely way.

DECORUM
The atmosphere in our class should be serious—not somber or pretentious, but collegiate and genuinely intellectual. No eating, sleeping, talking, texting, or doing work for other classes. No headphones, hoods, iPods, or phones. Electronic devices should be turned off and out of sight. Please show proper respect for our small community of learning.

DISCUSSION
Consider what the writer Thomas Merton says about a teacher he admired (Mark Van Doren, Columbia University):

Most of the time he asked questions. His questions were very good, and if you tried to answer them intelligently, you found yourself saying excellent things that you did not know you knew, and that you had not, in fact, known before.

I like to ask questions that make people think. I also like it when people ask me such questions. Think of an in-class question not as one whose answer you're already supposed to know but as an invitation to think. I know that this suggestion might go against the grain of much of your experience in school. You should be asking relevant questions too, of me and perhaps of one another. That helps to make the class less like a quiz show and more like a conversation.

One more observation on discussion, from the cultural critic Randolph Bourne:

A good discussion increases the dimensions of every one who takes part. Being rather self-consciously a mind in a group of minds means becoming more of a person.

As you can guess, I'm optimistic about discussion. For more on questions and discussion, read "How to answer a question": http://goo.gl/DlzaG. (That's a capital I after the D.)

GRADING
Your grade will be based on your writing (60%), class participation (20%), and final exam (20%).

Longer writing assignments receive letter grades. Shorter ones get numerical grades. Missing work receives a zero. Participation receives a numerical grade, an overall evaluation of the extent to which you're prepared and contributing: 100 (always), 85 (frequently), 75 (usually), 50 (sometimes), 0 (rarely or never).

To calculate semester grades, I use numerical equivalents for letter grades:

A 95 B+ 87 B 85
B- 82 C+ 77 C 75 C- 72
D+ 67 D 65 D- 62 F 55

Sometimes when I grade writing I'll give a grade that falls between two grades—e.g., B+/A- (89.5).

For semester grades, 90 or above is an A; 80 or above, a B; 70 or above, a C; 60 or above, a D; below 60, an F.

EWP
You may include work from the course in your Electronic Writing Portfolio. Please make sure that you understand the requirements for the EWP and that you fulfill them in a timely way. For more information: www.elu.edu/assess/ewpmain.php.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY
The English Department's statement on plagiarism:

Any teacher who discovers an act of plagiarism—"The appropriation or imitation of the language, ideas, and/or thoughts of another author, and the representation of them as one's original work" (Random House Dictionary of the English Language)—has the right and responsibility to impose upon the guilty student an appropriate penalty, up to and including immediate assignment of a grade of F for the course.

And my statement concerning academic integrity:

Any breach of academic integrity—from a single sentence cut and pasted into a dinky little assignment to a wholly unoriginal essay—is a serious matter and will get you a serious penalty. The Student Standards office recommends an F for the course. You will also be required to take a course in ethics administered by Student Standards, whose staff will keep your misconduct on record and notify your other professors that one of their students has violated academic integrity.

You should be familiar with Eastern's statement on academic integrity and should ask if you have any questions about quoting from and/or documenting sources. But because the work of the course is to be an expression of your ideas in your words, aside from words and ideas from properly acknowledged sources, questions of plagiarism and collusion should never arise.

Do not "borrow" work or give your work to anyone (allowing someone else to make use of your work is also a breach of academic integrity and will also get you a serious penalty, up to and including an F for the course).

COURSE OUTLINE (WEEKS)
1-14: Infinite Jest
15: Taking stock of the novel

Longer essay: due December 5. Other modest pieces of writing will be assigned as in-class writing or on a due-next-class basis.

Final exam: December 12, 2:45
FIND A GOOD TIME
AND PLACE TO WORK
Find a time and place that allow you to work with real attention. Stay away from the computer and silence your phone when you’re reading; turn off wi-fi when you’re writing. The work of the class invites and rewards your undivided attention.

READ WITH THE QUESTIONS
If you read with the questions, you’ll find that they make your experience of reading an active one. And you’ll find that your reading is far more focused, because you won’t be trying to keep track of everything. Think of the questions as something meant to be useful as you read, not as “homework” to be done afterwards.

MAKE A RECORD
Making notes—just a few hundred words for each reading assignment—can help you get a lot from the works we’re reading. Be selective: trying to summarize all that happens will leave you exhausted. (Again, read with the questions.) Marking passages with Post-it Notes can make it much easier to find your way back to things.

TAKE YOUR TIME
Consider what the novelist (and DFW fan) Zadie Smith, in a recent interview, says about the work of reading:

But the problem with readers, the idea we’re given of reading is that the model of a reader is the person watching a film, or watching television. So the greatest principle is, “I should sit here and I should be entertained.” And the more classical model, which has been completely taken away, is the idea of a reader as an amateur musician. An amateur musician who sits at the piano, has a piece of music, which is the work, made by somebody they don’t know, who they probably couldn’t comprehend entirely, and they have to use their skills to play this piece of music. The greater the skill, the greater the gift that you give the artist and that the artist gives you. That’s the incredibly un fashionable idea of reading. And yet when you practice reading, and you work at a text, it can only give you what you put into it.

Good readers understand that reading is a matter of practice, hard work, and rethinking. It’s meant to take time, with understanding coming gradually and changing over time.

BE WILLING TO IMPROVE
Many students come into an English class thinking that their ability to do the work is somehow set for all time. All evidence though suggests that human ability—of every sort—is not fixed but fluid. So think of this class as an opportunity to get better at the skills involved in reading and writing. In doing so, you will be working on survival skills: your ability as a reader and writer can open doors of all sorts for you in the world beyond college.

A syllabus from David Foster Wallace speaks for all college professors who care about writing:

If you want to improve your academic writing and are willing to put extra time and effort into it, I am a good teacher to have. But if you’re used to whipping off papers the night before they’re due, running them quickly through the computer’s Spellchecker, handing them in full of high-school errors and sentences that make no sense, and having the professor accept them “because the ideas are good” or something, please be informed that I draw no distinction between the quality of one’s ideas and the quality of those ideas’ verbal expression, and that I will not accept sloppy, rough-draftish, or semiliterate college writing.

BE HERE
On time, every time. Have the reading at hand, along with a notebook and a writing instrument. When we talk, make a relevant contribution. It should go without saying (but doesn’t) that you should take notes in class (and review them often). Without notes, it will be very difficult to do even minimally well in the work of the course, because you’ll have nothing to go back to.

“Being here” means being here for the full time. Don’t pack up early; it’s distracting and just makes it more difficult to get to the ending. The amount of time we have together as a class is remarkably small (a day and a half, not including the final), and we need all of it.

RULE 7
Rule 7: “The only rule is work. If you work, it will lead to something. It’s the people who do all of the work all the time who eventually catch on to things.”

I found this “rule” years ago in a photograph of an informal running list of rules, some serious, some not, made by the students and faculty of a college art department. I think that what Rule 7 says is absolutely true—for making art and for any kind of learning. The only necessary thing is work. (That doesn’t mean that there can be no fun.) The simplest way to do well in this course is to do all the work that there is to do. If you do so, you’ll have a terrific reading experience and a terrific semester.