



A Common(?) Reading Experience

We've all heard the phrases: Let's find common ground. You have no common sense. Oh, that's so common. We don't have anything in common. But what of the Common Book experience?

Is a book common because it's, well, pedestrian? Is it common because it describes practical experiences and pragmatic ideas? Not exactly. The Common Book is supposed to be rather uncommon—a narrative that strikes a refined balance among words, ideas, and form, compelling not one nor two but multitudes to take it up and discuss.

Our experiences with the Common Book for 2010-11, Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, have been anything but common. One of the goals of the Common Book initiative is to add some cohesion and commonality to the first-year experience of our students, but, at the same time, it was not our intention to make the experience so uniform that it didn't promote another key goal of the Quality Enhancement Plan, and that is to enhance critical inquiry among our students. Through reflective writing and discussions with student, faculty, and staff volunteers, our first-year students have pondered the puzzle that is Chris McCandless, a young man who dies in the Alaskan wilderness in the midst of an experiment in living. In the process they have learned that inquiry is about more than asking questions and seeking answers—that, in fact, it has a lot to do with the quality and depth of those questions and developing enough intellectual sophistication to forgo rushes to judgment. They have thought about this in the context of their major and career preferences as they have discussed the book with upper-level students majoring in their chosen field, as well as faculty and staff with experience and professional expertise.

Though we will continue to work with *Into the Wild* this spring through our UNIV 101 classes, the time has come for us to begin the process of selecting the Common Book for the 2011-12 academic year. To that end we are now accepting nominations, with the deadline for submission being January 24, 2011. Ideas for a Common Book that is decidedly uncommon should be submitted to Robert Alexander (robert.alexander@nicholls.edu).

Message from the Director

My first year as the director of the CAFÉ has been exciting, busy, and enjoyable. The CAFÉ hosted 59 events during the 2009-2010 school year, including Master Advisor Workshops, the CAFÉ book club, technology workshops, and training sessions for Digital Measures and Blackboard. During the fall 2010 semester, the CAFÉ hosted 28 workshops/trainings/discussion forums. In addition, we had informal chat sessions on Friday afternoons. These *Caffeine Therapy* chats had topics as varied as the weather.

This coming spring, training sessions on Moodle will begin. Facilitators will relate the current processes of Blackboard to those in Moodle to ease the transition. There will also be workshops on Apple's iPad. If you or someone you know would like to lead a workshop, training session, discussion forum, or if you would like to see a particular topic covered, please contact me at lori.soule@nicholls.edu.

On another note, we are also in the process of re-vamping the Master Advisor Certification into more of a Professional Development Certification, along with faculty development monetary awards. Besides hosting different events, we moved the CAFÉ location from small, cramped 211 Elkins to open and spacious 209 Elkins. We now have 12 computer stations and an instructor computer with projector and screen. We are also more comfortable: We now have several additional chairs and a couple of tables, conducive to small meetings, and the space can be reserved. As part of the move, a satellite library was located in the CAFÉ. Over 500 circulating books have been relocated, so faculty can drop in and browse. We are also planning our rescheduled open house for the spring. Remember, this is YOUR faculty development center. Stop in between 7:30 and 4:00 for coffee, bring a lunch and eat at one of the tables, browse the books, or just sit and watch the pine trees move in the breeze.

The MAPP to Treasure?

Our journey began in August 2007 when the first critical thinking rubrics were used in English 101 classes. In the spring of 2008, the rubrics were used in English 102 classes. The following year, they were used again in 101 and 102 in the fall and spring, respectively. At the beginning of each fall semester, virtually all students enrolled in 101 took the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). The 102 students took it at the end of the spring semester. Our hope was to find drastic differences in scores between those students who used the rubric and those who didn't.

In the spring of 2008, 43% showed improvement; 39% showed improvement in spring of 2009. Analyses are still being conducted to distinguish the impact the students in the courses using the rubric had on those scores. We also wanted to know whether the students who used the rubric realized an increased gpa. Well, we discovered that while these students were enrolled in the course using the rubric, the GPA (and retention) was basically the same as those students who did not use the rubric. However, to our amazement, we did discover that the students who had used the rubric did realize an increased GPA the following semester. For instance, 74% of the grades (n29,938) for students in 102 who did not use the rubric were A,B, or C and 24% were D,F, or W the following semester. Yet of those who used the rubric in 102, 81% of the grades (n228) were A,B, or C with only 18% as D, F, or W.

The fall 2007 and spring 2008 cohort of students have moved on to continue their studies. We will continue our analysis by examining their progress. Meanwhile, we have found that The Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP) results from fall 2009 show an increase in both Writing Level 3 (highest level) and Critical Thinking. While not a drastic increase, this shows progress, illustrated in the table below:

	Spring 2007	Fall 2009
Skill Dimension	Proficient	Proficient
Reading Level 1	56%	63%
Reading Level 2	32%	32%
Critical Thinking	2%	5%
Writing Level 1	58%	64%
Writing Level 2	13%	19%
Writing Level 3	4%	7%

The results for fall 2009 are based on 438 students. The increase from spring 2007 to fall 2009 represents 3% of those 438 students, which is 13 students. Of those 438 students, 25 were in that first year cohort of students in the fall 2007 and spring 2008 who used the rubric. Since the MAPP does not provide us with a breakdown of scores with student names and numbers, the search is underway to find out where those 25 students are hiding in those results.

Ever wonder what goes on inside your brain when you hear music? Then you should join the CAFÉ Book Club and discuss this and other interesting topics with your university colleagues. A group of 5 or 6 of us have met in the CAFÉ twice already, to drink coffee and muse about what we have read in *This is Your Brain on Music*, written by Daniel Levitin, a unique individual who combines a Ph.D. in neuropsychology with several years experience in the music industry. Here are the kinds of things we have talked about:

- How composers exploit the way our brains create sense
- Why we emotionally attach to music we listen to as teenagers
- How insidious jingles get stuck in our heads (earworms)

You don't have to know anything about music because Levitin explains complex concepts and terms in easy-to-understand language. And for fun, you can fixate on his name dropping (famous people he met in the music industry, like Paul Simon, Whitney Houston, Aretha Franklin, and Carlos Santana). Our next meeting will be in early Spring 2011, in the CAFÉ (Elkins 209). Melissa Goldsmith, musicologist and librarian, will lead the informal, informative, and entertaining discussion. There's a good chance there will be some toe tapping, vocalizing, and instrument playing!

Expand Your Critical Thinking Vocabulary!

Critical reading is an active, intellectually engaged process in which the reader participates in an inner dialogue with the writer. Most people read uncritically and so miss some part of what is expressed while distorting other parts. A critical reader realizes the way in which reading, by its very nature, means entering into a point of view other than our own, the point of view of the writer. A critical reader actively looks for assumptions, key concepts and ideas, reasons and justifications, supporting examples, parallel experiences, implications and consequences, and any other structural features of the written text, to interpret and assess it accurately and fairly.

Critical Writing means expressing ourselves in language that requires we arrange our ideas in some relationships to each other. When accuracy and truth are at issue, then we must understand what our thesis is, how we can support it, how we can elaborate it to make it intelligible to others, what objections can be raised to it from other points of view, what the limitations are to our point of view, and so forth.

---From www.criticalthinking.org

Newsletter staff: Tony Fonseca, Managing Editor; Melissa Goldsmith, Editor; Lori Soule, Editor. Writers this issue: Allen Alexander, Lori Soule, Keri Turner, and Ray Giguette. The statements and opinions included in these pages are those of the newsletter staff only. Any statements and opinions are not those of Nicholls State University or the University of Louisiana System.