Chapter 2

Guide to Literature-based Learning

READING THE MATERIAL

The point is that in the activity of literary imagining we are led to imagine and describe with greater precision, focusing our attention on each word, feeling each event more keenly – whereas much of actual life goes by without that heightened awareness, and is thus, in a certain sense, not fully lived . . . So literature is an extension of life not only horizontally, bringing the reader into contact with events or locations or persons or problems he or she has not otherwise met, but also, so to speak, vertically, giving the reader experience that is deeper, sharper, and more precise than much of what takes place in life.

This topic may be unexpected and puzzling because it provides suggestions on how to read. But, in fact, you have already in your educational career honed your skills at various types of reading, ranging from literary analysis, which may focus on the careful hunt for symbol, theme, and use of language; to the type of reading skills associated with executives, i.e., the ability to skim, pick out important points, do some (but not exhaustive) analysis, and come to a point of view – grounded in data and analysis – that you can defend.

In “The Moral Leader,” the materials we read include fiction, history, biography, autobiography, and plays, in several instances complemented by extracts from philosophical and ethical writings. These works require yet another approach to reading, analysis, and judgment-formation. While different, however, it is no less rigorous and disciplined than other approaches.

The following reading framework will help you engage in the material of the course and prepare yourself for class discussion. This framework operates at two levels.
LEVEL ONE: READING FOR REACTION

The first level is what we'll call reading for reaction – often visceral reaction – to the story and the characters and the decisions they make, or, for the philosophical writings, to the nature of the arguments that are being laid out. Part of the pleasure of this course is the uniformly high quality of writing we are treated to, and this writing can grab our attention, and our emotions, in very powerful ways. It is critical for us to know what grabs us – what strikes us as compelling, or angering, or dismaying, or inspiring – since these emotions give us pointers for what we want to focus on as we look at the texts in more detail. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum, author of the quote above, observed that emotions are themselves modes of vision, or recognition. So, as you are reading and reacting, you are monitoring your reactions – so that you can eventually understand why you respond the way you do.

But “The Moral Leader” is not a “great books” course. We are here to learn from these works, not only to react to them. There are assignment questions for each class that ask you to engage in particular analyses, interpretations, and judgments, as well as in personal connections. These questions imply that you do more than just read for reaction. The questions benefit from the next level, where we do the work necessary to learning.

LEVEL TWO: READING FOR DEPTH AND LEARNING

The second level is reading for depth and learning. At this level you are examining the material carefully from three perspectives: description, analysis, and judgment.

Description

While description sounds easy enough, in “The Moral Leader” it means getting into the mind of a character or the heart of an argument – people (and ideas) that are, or may be, very different from you and your own ways of thinking. The questions you ask of yourself are: Do I really understand this person or this point of view? Could I articulate what makes this person tick? Could I expound on this idea?

This particular skill, the ability to understand other people and other ideas, is probably one of the most important capabilities you can acquire in making you effective in organizations. As you may well know from your own experience, nearly all of the meaningful work you do will involve your ability to engage other people and their ideas, so focusing on careful description – the ability to get inside other people and their ideas – is critical.

Because the material in “The Moral Leader” is varied, not every character you meet or every idea you encounter will be immediately “likeable.” Indeed, you discovered this when you reacted to the material. But the process of description asks you to enter fully into the general context and specific situations of characters,
and to appreciate the complexities of the ideas presented. In contrast to reaction, where you yourself were (viscerally) responding, in description you are essentially taking yourself and your reactions out of the equation.

**Analysis**

The analysis perspective asks you to make sense of what you read, looking at the characters, actions, context, and ideas in a more conceptual way. Whereas the description perspective asks you to imagine yourself as someone else or to understand other viewpoints, the abstracting process of analysis helps you to examine what's going on and how arguments unfold. Analysis begins your search for the reasons why certain situations develop the way they do, why people behave in certain ways and not others, what makes arguments different from one another.

Much of the work we do when we analyze is pattern recognition, looking for noteworthy or surprising trends in available data, or for specific, identifiable types of situations, actions, or modes of reasoning. In "The Moral Leader" we aim to expand the number and kinds of patterns that you recognize and can draw on for analysis.

For example, you will start to develop an understanding of fundamental types of moral problems. Being able to characterize a situation as belonging to a class of moral problem (for example, problems of conflicting rights) is a first step in wrestling the problem to the ground, a way of making it more tractable. You will also be exposed to different moral theories, or perspectives, from which to engage in moral analysis, judgment, and decision-making. Over time, you will begin to recognize strands of these moral perspectives in the justifications that characters offer for their actions — another pattern to look for that helps you understand how they are thinking and deciding.

These approaches will augment the analytical skills and instincts you bring to the material and will increase your ability to analyze the texts we study. The assignment questions for each class will build on these general skills, and will focus them on particularly important issues to examine and to understand.

**Judgment**

The third perspective is judgment, the hardest of all to come to after description and analysis. That is, we are all tempted to "judge" right off the bat. This course emphasizes, however, that judgment is what we do last. After allowing yourself to react to what you've read, then delving into a deeper understanding of what you've read — only at this point are you truly ready to make a judgment. "Judgment" is your best-considered evaluation of characters and their actions, of ideas and their implications — on the basis of having done the work of reaction, then of description and analysis.

Good judgment — judgment that others will consider and feel compelled to respond to — requires careful preparation. The most persuasive judgments are those that come packaged with reasons — well laid out arguments, supported by data of
various kinds, that explain how you arrived at this position and not some other. As you flesh out your arguments, you will find that you challenge your own thinking, clarifying, refining, and helping you understand the nature of the judgments you make.

Summary of reading framework

You'll find this course much more rewarding if you become aware of reading at both of these levels: reading for reaction as well as reading for depth and learning. Discipline in reading this way assists in class discussion because you will be clear on the perspective you are speaking from.

- Is your comment a description – an attempt to help us really (i.e., objectively) understand a character and her situation and context, or an idea?
- Do you have a way of interpreting events or actions or characters or arguments that helps us see the material in a clearer and richer light – in short, are you analyzing?
- Are you judging – speaking from the vantage point of your own prior description and analysis, and your values, experience, and considered beliefs?

READING THE MATERIAL: STUDENT TIPS AND SUGGESTIONS

The student responses are in italics.

When to read

- Don't leave the reading of the book till the last minute. I have noticed a marked difference in my class performance when I've read the book a day or two in advance of the class time as opposed to finishing it a few minutes before class. (This might just be a function of your subconscious working on analyzing the issues in the book – without really setting aside time to answer specific questions.) I would highly recommend getting the reading done a day in advance of class to give yourself a chance to think over the moral issues in the reading and come to form your own opinion on them. Last-minute reading allows little time for thought development.

Background readings

- The background information [to each reading] is key. Sometimes I have read it before the book, and sometimes I have read it after. I am not sure which approach I like more; nevertheless, I always find that the context is instrumental in aiding my understanding of the story.
Take notes

- Read the questions that will be discussed in class before reading the book, so you can flag passages as you read them, rather than hunting through the book later to find the parts that best relate to the questions.
- Write down notes for yourself/mark parts of the text/fold pages (i.e. whatever it takes) where something strikes you. This is more of a gut feel about things – so, if anything strikes you as worthy of more thought/discussion, note it!
- Mark passages while you are reading that somehow represent moral challenge, reasoning, leadership, etc. It is very powerful to be able to cite specific lines from the reading during the discussion that can support and clarify your points.

Build connections

- Putting yourself in the character's shoes when reading a novel/play for class is key. You will find that a lot of the decisions the character makes that you are critical of as a reader you are quite sympathetic to when putting yourself in that same situation. This leads to a much deeper understanding of the underlying motivation for actions and reactions that we are bound to witness in our future life and career.
- Try to relate the story, character or dilemma to something in your life to make it more tangible.
- Try, as you're reading, to connect the week's text to other texts in the course that you've read – it's really fun when you see how your thought process develops across weeks, and it's also useful to apply the learnings from one week to other weeks.

PARTICIPATING IN CLASS

"The Moral Leader" is a rigorous discussion-based course, a forum for learning that allows you to participate in a process of personal and collective exploration. By participating actively, you will find that the course offers an excellent venue to develop your own skills in discussion, listening, persuasion, and debate.

This would be true of any seminar-style course, but is particularly relevant to "The Moral Leader." The course crosses boundaries that are not normally crossed, allowing questions raised by the texts about moral decision-making, race, class, cultural practices, and religious beliefs to be pursued, both as ends in themselves and as rehearsal for the kinds of discussions that will be necessary for you and other twenty-first-century leaders to facilitate.

Good listening and discussion skills are essential – a life-long pursuit for any leader – but sometimes we wonder what criteria to use to determine how well we are communicating our thoughts and ideas, and how well we are engaging with the thoughts and ideas of others. Table 2.1 illustrates some of the fundamental elements of effective communication in a course like "The Moral Leader".
**Table 2.1 Discussion skills for “The Moral Leader”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion skill</th>
<th>Behaviors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Careful reading; able to reference text easily and correctly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identifies patterns or themes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Debate</td>
<td>Good defense of point of view with back-up data from text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>On-point rebuttal; direct, clear response to another’s comment or question</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Able to escalate or deepen argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>Respectful and attentive to speakers; closely follows discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Able to summarize others’ views and arguments accurately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>Builds on others’ contributions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Helps others understand text, frameworks, or concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Helps others clarify their views or change them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td>Open to revising personal views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adds new layer or poses larger question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Proposes novel argument or interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Proposes new direction for discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of personal</td>
<td>Illuminating example: Helps others see new angle or understand topic in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experience</td>
<td>more depth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuity</td>
<td>Maintains flow of discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creates links across texts or class sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good summary: Draws strands of discussion together</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PARTICIPATING IN CLASS: STUDENT TIPS AND SUGGESTIONS**

*The student responses are in italics.*

**Be yourself**

- Speak your mind in class. This isn’t a typical business course where you should structure your thoughts along frameworks – the discussion is geared towards introspection and deep examination of an issue, so share your thoughts openly.
- Feel free to challenge interpretations openly and to bring personal as well as current affairs and business analogies into your comments. It helps you and the class bring a direct association to the character/situation under discussion.

**Be sensitive**

- In terms of participation, speak sensitively since some of the issues discussed in the course might be delicate or personal. I feel it’s important to ensure your classmates feel comfortable to participate openly as the greatest learning comes from listening to others’ ideas.
Stay flexible

- As for actual discussion – come in with an open perspective and really engage in the conversation at hand – it will take turns that you never could anticipate, and as a participant you have to be nimble and open enough actively to listen and contribute to the discussion.

- When it comes to participating productively, my trick is to ask myself explicitly if I agree with everything said in the class. That is, as each person speaks, I ask myself whether I agree with the comment. This allows me an opportunity to speak at any moment in the class, it keeps me very engaged in the discussion and, most importantly, it has truly helped me in defining my own views on being a moral leader.

Reflect after class

- I find the introspective aspects of the course to be the most valuable, and would encourage trading time spent analyzing other characters for more time spent on self-reflection (developing your own framework, considering times when you’ve been at your moral best and worst, what you’ll change, etc.).

- The thing that makes this class most powerful to me is the next step (past understanding characters) of contrasting their behavior with how you might behave. I think my real insights come when I think about what I would do and what I would like myself to do.

NOTES

3. Ibid., p. 79.