

“Great Books” programs have shaped my academic experience. My BA is from Shimer College, a small private college whose curriculum consists almost entirely of Great Books courses, and I have taught in two Great Books-based Core programs, at Rhodes College in 2003-2004 and in my current position at Whitman College from 2004 until the present. My experience with Great Books curricula as both student and professor allows me to assess the strengths and weaknesses of such programs from both perspectives.

I entered Shimer College after tenth grade as an “early entrant.” Shimer, founded in 1853, became affiliated with the University of Chicago in the late 19th century and in 1950 adopted a version of the “Hutchins Plan” as its curriculum. For an intellectually oriented 16-year-old who had been bored by high school, the Hutchins Plan was a revelation. The Great Books curriculum at Shimer honed my appreciation for great writing, introduced me to fascinating texts I would not have read on my own, and engaged me thoroughly in the life of the mind. It could not give me a strong disciplinary background in any one area of learning; my study of Classics had to wait until graduate school. A much more important drawback of the program, I now think, was that it did not provide students with any sense of the importance of cultural and historical context for understanding texts. Shimer’s approach to reading was strongly grounded in the New Criticism; classes operated on the assumption that the texts are timeless and transparent and can be read without regard to their cultural context, and therefore that professor and students all approach the texts with equal expertise. As a naive and somewhat arrogant 16-year-old I was delighted to have my ideas and “insights” considered as valid as those of trained experts in various fields, but I now consider this a great weakness of Great Books curricula and of many Core programs.

Teaching in Core courses has reinforced my belief in the crucial importance of context. Some Core programs, however, still espouse the idea of “timeless and transparent texts.” Whitman College’s required first-year course is taught by faculty from various disciplines (including some scientists) and depends on the assumption that the texts are fully accessible to non-experts. The faculty has recently restructured this course by adding some non-Western texts so that we now read the *Bhagavad Gita* as well as the *Odyssey* and selections from the Qur’an as well as excerpts from the Tanakh and the New Testament. The previous course’s wholly Western focus was the main impetus for revising it; while the remaining Western emphasis can be seen as troublesome, since it can be taken to imply that most great books are Western “Great Books,” I am more concerned with the assumption that all interpreters have equal access to the text. Presenting the *Odyssey* or the *Aeneid* as context-free “great stories” that speak equally to all readers risks suggesting that the experience of free males in a patriarchal, slave-holding society is normative for all humans. To present these texts as enshrining “universal” truths that can be apprehended and appreciated without regard to cultural context or to nuances of original language does a disservice both to the texts and to modern readers. There is without question a continuing place for Classics in Great Books courses, but as our discipline moves further from the center of our common cultural capital and as Core courses are taught more frequently by professors who have no familiarity with Classics at all, it becomes crucially important that such courses include rich cultural and contextual background to help students evaluate the classical texts they read on those texts’ own terms rather than as eternally consistent, eternally unchanging “Great Books” with the same message for all times and all cultures.