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CASE STUDY – EXEMPLAR PEDAGOGY

Reviving the gobbet: venerable sophistication for contemporary media literacy

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Abstract

This paper suggests that a technique for close textual reading used in history, the classics and theology for two almost two centuries, the gobbet, can be repurposed as a method of developing media literacy in higher education students in other disciplines. The gobbet is a bite-sized extract from a longer set text learners have studied that acts as an entry to the whole text, permitting critical, contextualised evaluation to take place. As a pedagogical tool, the gobbet can be a counterweight to discontinuous reading practices and abstracted information sources. It is highly effective for analysing contemporary media and discourse, in producing articulate learners confident in their ability to analyse information, and in developing transferable critical and communication skills for scholarly, career and personal use. This paper situates the gobbet, reframed for modern use in an expanded range of scholarly disciplines, as a learner-centric method that develops agency and independence within a phenomenographic pedagogical frame.

Keywords: Gobbet, Media literacy, Textual analysis, Critical analysis, Phenomenography, Learner-centric

Introduction

The common starting point for explorations in critical media literacy, whether drawing on critical (Frankfurt School), media (inspired by McLuhan), or literacy (the process of understanding and creating texts) is that a text has ineluctable components. Every text is a construction using unique language that contributes to constructions of social reality; it contains ideological messages and has politico-economic consequences: the media consumer's concern is to negotiate meaning (Westbrook, 2011, p. 155). Pedagogy diverges on how this negotiation can be taught effectively, and it may seem counterintuitive to suggest that a technique for textual analysis from the Victorian era offers a novel yet effective approach: the gobbet. Reputedly originating in civil service entry examinations of the era (West, 2020), the gobbet has largely been the preserve of historians, classicists and theologians, whose precise, objective ways of reading texts contextualised the worlds they studied. It is the end stage of a pedagogical process that begins with rudimentary introductions to texts early in higher education, ending in critical, analytical skills as the learner's cognition and academic ability progress. The Victorian era does not evoke the positive aspects of student-centred learning, agency and independence so valued today, but it does speak to structure and process, of techniques honed to become second nature. This article suggests that the interrogative and reflective skills developed by repeated practice with the gobbet benefits learners in any discipline where meaningful engagement with texts is necessary, but especially media literacy.

For many students, the gobbet has been an academic practice to be endured, not enjoyed. In 2018, when a history graduate sued Oxford University alleging deficient teaching of his gobbet class, the UK High Court determined that: "The word 'gobbet' does not generally evoke a pleasant picture or a comfortable feeling" (Siddiqui v Oxford University, 2018). Although the gobbet has a reputation for esoterism rooted in stuffy Oxbridge pedagogical traditions, the negative inference may be misguided. The word is from the French *gober*, to swallow. It refers to both a bite-sized extract from a longer text "chosen to invite the student to reflect on an important issue and to test their knowledge of the document, its background and origins and its significance" and the student's concise written analysis of it (Ibid.). Being foisted with rigid adherence to form and process on learners for over a century did little for its popularity. Recalling his experience of gobbeting as an undergraduate in the 1960s one historian observed:

some of us began to feel that we had been the victims of a self-induced illusion. The mystique of the documents evaporated, and left us with the task of learning them. For the documents were 'given' and had to be 'learnt'. They were fixed and finished items to be classified, to be called upon to furnish illustrations, and above all, to be known. (Lee, 1970, p. 332)

The Classicist Mary Beard was “all too ready to dance on its grave” when she started teaching in Cambridge in 1984, and discontinued gobbets. Echoing Lee, for her, gobbeting had become stale, and did not foster a spirit of inquisitiveness in learners. In 2010, she recognised its value as “a venerable, traditional pedagogic exercise” and reintroduced it in her teaching (Beard, 2010).

It may be coincidence that interest in the gobbet is waxing even as learners' ability to dissect not especially challenging texts wanes. Younger digital natives display a tendency towards discontinuous reading (reading information non-sequentially or non-chronologically) and fragmented reading (flitting between texts of varying subject matter) (Hillesund, 2010). There is also the matter of abstracted, dubious or wantonly misleading information sources, or what may be gleaned from a mobile phone screen. Media literacy requires media consumers to interact and question what they encounter in order for civic society to thrive, the knowledge economy to benefit society and individuals, and to foster life-long learning and cultural expression (Lin, Li, Deng, & Lee, 2013, p. 161). If this tenet of media literacy is understood to mean going beyond casual media consumption to framing information based on facts and analysis, and responding in a meaningful participatory act, the gobbet becomes an effective analytical technique. Where contemporary readers are increasingly exposed to shorter texts and faster reading times, harming their interrogative, participatory and communicative abilities, the gobbet slows down reading and reintroduces learners to longer texts that build capacity, knowledge, creativity and memory (Counsell, 2003, p. 3).

Little has been written on the gobbet from a pedagogical perspective. The commonest sources of information are university handbooks or module descriptors, which reduce the gobbet to a 'how-to' technique for learners. While first-time learners need to understand how to apply it, understanding its pedagogical underpinnings, arguably, increases its effectiveness. The gobbet has three discrete stages, or four if the first, provenance, is split to allow context stand apart. Provenance identifies who created the text, and when; whether it is typical of the

author; the author's and text's reliability; and the circumstance of its production. Context addresses the genre or type of text it is and the intended audience, picking up on events or themes of the time in which it was produced. Analysis is where learners peel back from the extract to engage with the whole text, which is explored for deeper meaning. Learners examine the language from a functional perspective, and for linguistic flourishes and stylised turns of phrase, to explain the author's theme or intent. Finally, evaluation assesses the text's significance, identifying the impact and responses it provoked, and asking what voice or assertions need to be challenged, and why? The written appraisal that allows learners to demonstrate their knowledge must be no more than 500-750 words.

For developing media literacy, the type of media text is somewhat immaterial, though short texts may offer limited scope. Learners can examine news reports on television or in print, documentaries, feature films, parliamentary debates, song lyrics, still images or physical objects; for some gobbet enthusiasts, even recipes have learning potential (Pounder & Buchanan, 2021, p. 104). What is essential is that the gobbet reveals layers of knowledge as incisively as an authoritative textbook, in a way learners may comprehend from their own worldview. For a module on public affairs on TU Dublin's MA in Public Relations, sources including Amanda Gorman's poem at Joe Biden's presidential inauguration, *The Hill We Climb*, a Michael and Danny Healy-Rae general election leaflet, and a newspaper cartoon depicting Sinn Féin leader Mary Lou McDonald as a witch (Cogan, 2021) have required students to approach media discourses from uncommon yet revelatory perspectives. More pertinently, it broadens their awareness of what media texts beyond the obvious shape public discourse, and how. Words and images are these students' stock in trade as fledgling strategic communications consultants: there is value in knowing how to dissect a multi-layered text that addresses a multiplicity of audiences simultaneously, and situate it within its context or frame, whether they are the analyst or creator.

The gobbet does not test knowledge alone: it probes the learner's ability to sift through evidence to make a reasoned point (West, 2020). Unlike an exam or essay where learners can use bare facts or purple prose to conceal lack of depth, the gobbet's brevity and precision as an assessment method leaves no room for preamble, verbiage or repeating the obvious. The Siddiqui case established that: "It is not unusual for students to find gobbets a particular challenge because students are more used to essay writing, whereas with gobbets they are required to respond immediately to a passage presented to them" (Siddiqui v Oxford

University, 2018). For an experienced instructor, grading a learner's gobbet is almost instinctive. A Pass gobbet identifies the extract and provides elementary context, though analysis and evaluation are absent, or at best descriptive. A Lower Second describes with good accuracy noteworthy details in the text, and makes an appreciable, if light, analytical effort, though the ensuing evaluation may be vague. An Upper Second confidently identifies the provenance and context, with a strong analysis of the document and identification of a broader external context. Evaluation, however, is confined to describing rather than exploring themes. A First-class comprehensively and precisely provides provenance and context. The analysis is strong, incorporating the document and wider contemporary context. The evaluation follows as a seamless extension of the analysis, exploring the document's lasting significance.

One of the gobbet's strengths is that learners must draw inferences from the texts they study. This is higher order learning that takes them from producing descriptive or regurgitative work to grasping the text's essential truth. From a history pedagogical standpoint:

The argument is that to seek the truth in the past not only must we be justified in what we believe, we must know that other people (past and present) are justified in what they claim. The sources, it is assumed, provide the foundation for this justification. Axiomatically, therefore, historians are interested in the epistemological process of inference that, it is believed, has the power to distinguish assertion from historical knowledge thus providing access to the truth of the past. (Munslow, 2000)

Replace 'history' with any higher education analogue predicated on close textual reading – sociology, journalism, politics, media or gender studies for instance – and 'past' with 'present', and the value of this ability broadens. Furthermore, the learner develops rationality and agency by understanding that the strongest inferences draw on both *a priori*, deductive reasoning, and *a posteriori*, inductive or abductive reasoning. Thinking from pure reason – “logic, intuition, ingrained ideas or mental capacities” (Ibid., p. 21) – and from assessing empirical evidence before them creates stronger pathways to truth.

Accordingly, the gobbet blends precise textual knowledge with personal interpretative creativity and experiential insight. That learners cannot separate the self from the text is a

significant conceptual shift from the gobbet's original didactic purpose. Unquestionably, critical self-awareness strengthens interpretation. Modern pedagogy values learner independence as a means of deriving authenticity from the learning process and outcomes. The notion of independence is suggestive of learner agency because "interpretation is always a social process ... produced in response to something. It is part of a dialogue over time" (History Association, 2019, p. 23). The dialogue learners have with a text gives them the authority to interrogate it from their own experience, often revealing new perspectives in this *a priori* approach, even to the instructor who has chosen the text. This would not have been considered appropriate when the gobbet was developing, as impartiality and objectivity were pedagogical absolutes, but it indicates where, with reframing to incorporate learner agency while maintaining a dispassionate perspective, the gobbet can help develop media literacy. Traditionally, the history gobbet has kept some residual reverence to the nineteenth century German historian Leopold von Ranke's maxim *wie es eigentlich gewesen* (how things really were) (Tosh & Lang, 2006, p. 7-8). Disinclined to overly creative interpretations, Rankean empiricism viewed history through the subjects' eyes, not the observers'. Arguably, such strictures should be cast aside today when a plurality of voices can approach texts with near-endless experiential individuality.

This, however, is where a shift in teaching the gobbet becomes necessary. It was conceived as an instructor-centric pedagogy: the all-knowing instructor devised the module, selected texts, and taught in a way which led learners to defined outcomes. That process is largely concerned with how learners engaged in low-level activity such as note-taking acquire information the instructor wishes to impart, and reproduce it to achieve satisfactory grades. A phenomenographic approach can create a learner-centric perspective to counter this.

Phenomenography:

focuses on people's ideas about, and experience of, reality rather than reality itself. However, phenomenography does not say that there are variable realities, or that there are multiple and endless ways of experiencing the world. Rather, it says that people have variable ways of experiencing and conceptualising reality, but that there are a limited number of ways and that these ways are interrelated. (Cossham, 2017, p. 18)

Drawing on each learner's experiences of the world they inhabit and how these inter-relate with the text leads to less binary interpretations, as the life experiences in a cohort of learners – for instance, social, racial, economic, class, gender – become new perspectives for deliberation that may exist outside the instructor's experience. This, of course, requires learners to understand that their instructor is not the fount of all knowledge, and the instructor to emphasise that learning, not teaching, is the common goal. The purpose of “including pedagogy with media literacy is to foreground theory and practice, learning and teaching, task and achievement, as part and parcel of a larger whole” (Westbrook, 2011, p. 156). Such transformational approaches require participants to embrace being, at least at the outset, uncomfortable. The instructor-learner relationship needs to achieve an equilibrium, with *just* sufficient teaching conducted to permit learning to begin. This downplays the role of instructor as teacher, but enhances it as a facilitator who orientates texts towards learners' phenomenographic experiences, a process that also tilts responsibility for independent, self-directed learning towards the learner, and requires high levels of motivation and discursive participation from them. Formative feedback from both the instructor and peers (learners' ability to give feedback is, itself, an indication of knowledge having been assimilated) allows deeper cognition and preparation for assessments that deliver summative feedback (Mansfield, 2011, p. 101). This condition is achieved by emphasising the relationship learners have with the text, rather than the process of learning. The gobbet in this way delivers:

an holistic evaluation of learning exemplified by the qualitative changes in the way a person conceives and interacts with the world, rather than the testing of the amount of knowledge, or measuring the set of skills a learner acquires. (Andretta, 2007, p. 166).

With enough practice, the gobbet may become an instinctive process to the learner turned savvy media consumer, who instinctively approaches media texts with the mantra: provenance, context, analysis, evaluation. This is what makes it so useful for developing media literacy, as few tools or models are sophisticated enough to give media consumers the independent skills to critique text as the gobbet does. Many media literacy tools tend to be checklists for short texts, often online, and direct learners to ask what the source is, and whether it can be trusted; to look at the URL as a quality determinant; to see if a fact can be checked for accuracy and so on. Frequently such checklists are applicable to school-level or basic literacy learning – NALA, for instance, has a useful guide for adult literacy (National

Adult Literacy Association, 2021). In higher education, the gobbet shares similarities with Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis, where the micro, meso and macro layers (corresponding to the text, its production and dissemination, and analysis) are broadly congruent (Hora, 2020, p. 193). As critical discourse analysis is difficult to separate from associated concepts such as hegemony and power, learners may need to approach texts from an overt conceptual standpoint, unlike the gobbet which emphasises detachment. Furthermore, divergent approaches to critical discourse analysis may be too nuanced for some undergraduate learners. The gobbet has also been likened to IA Richards' practical criticism technique, where students are confronted with an unidentified poem and expected to comment authoritatively on it (Davidson, 2008). However, while there are similarities in the level of textual engagement, the gobbet is never presented as an unseen text: it is a gateway to knowledge rather than a step into the unknown.

Why, then, is the gobbet not more widely used? Its relative obscurity and use in a limited number of academic disciplines does not wholly explain why the technique has not crossed boundaries. Certainly, the number of graduates turned academics who were trained in the technique, even in the last decade alone, suggests that there is a critical mass of potential instructors available. A small percentage of these working in interdisciplinary fields would be sufficient to generate awareness. Three interlocking reasons may explain its low profile. Firstly, the gobbet is hard work. For the learner and instructor, significant effort is required in preparation and delivery. The instructor must source texts, at least one for each week of teaching, general enough to introduce a topic, yet having the scholarly heft for deeper exploration. Learners must read in advance, up to several hundred pages over the course of the module, and write on each text with clinical economy. This leads to the related second reason that the gobbets *are* the module: they are not merely bolted on as illustrative texts, or components learners can avoid. It is in the reflective, discursive unpicking of their intricacies, rather than a lecture, that learning occurs. This leads to the third reason, scale and cost: the gobbet needs small classes, ideally six to twelve participants in tutorial, so that every learner can contribute to the discussion. For financially pressed institutions, such resourcing is tantamount to profligacy, and reason enough to discourage its use.

It would be a shame if the development of the gobbet as a media literacy technique was curtailed, not by surmountable lack of awareness or disciplinary constraints, but short-sighted budgetary ones. The potential of the gobbet to produce articulate learners who are confident

in their ability to analyse and communicate information, not accept it unquestioningly, and who have highly-developed transferable skills for academia, their careers and life, is synchronous with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals on quality education, and especially the socio-cultural aspirations of Target 4.7 (United Nations, n.d.). For a higher education institute in an increasingly competitive environment seeking to attract students at all levels, and meet industry and society's needs, the quality of graduate the gobbet helps produce can be a mark of distinction. For institutions, implementing the technique does not necessitate reinventing the wheel or training staff. A body of practice built up over two centuries needs only minor modifications to modernise and adapt the gobbet to new disciplines of learning. As one avowed scholar of the gobbet expressed it: if the gobbet did not exist in our contemporary world, we would have had to invent it (West, 2020).

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