



**General Education
Conference 2012**

*General Education and University Curriculum
Reform: An International Conference in Hong Kong*

Conference Proceedings

Venue: City University of Hong Kong June 12 -14 2012

Organizers: City University of Hong Kong and The Hong Kong America Center

Editor:

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Self-Interpretation of Student Dreams as a Tool for Personal Growth in General Education Classes

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Theme: Case Studies in Developing Interdisciplinary Curricula for GE

Twenty-seven times in the past twenty-five years I have taught a GE class on dream interpretation for personal growth.ⁱ While various details have evolved, the main objective has always been to introduce students to several major psychological theorists who focus on dream interpretation as the major clue to the nature and development of the human psyche, and to guide students in applying these theories to their own lives, in a quest for increased self-understanding.

The tool enabling students to fulfill this objective has been the dream diary.ⁱⁱ A dream diary is a daily record of a person's dreams over a period of time, followed by reflections on how the dream relates to his/her daily life situations, with a view toward gaining insight into one's personal growth. Due to the length of the semester at my university, and to allow time at the beginning and end of the semester for the usual introductory and concluding tasks, I normally require students to keep their dream diary for a minimum period of ten consecutive weeks.

When I tell others about this assessment method, the most common response is something like: "What? A *dream diary*?! But that is so subjective, how can you assign fair grades?" That is far less problematic than most people think, provided the teacher clearly explains an objective set of grading criteria to the students, then follows them rigorously when grading. This lecture's purpose is to share the ten criteria I introduce to students (each worth 10% of the grade) as a framework for open and clear learning outcomes. Within this framework students have *total freedom* to explore their own personal growth in a non-threatening environment. In short, I assess how well they comply with the framework, not whether they have found *the* correct "meaning" of each dream.

But before I share that framework, let me say a few words about the two psychologists whose theories are the main focus of the class: Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and Carl Jung (1875-1961). I actually devote only a few lectures (four sections of the textbook) entirely to Freud, using him more as a sounding board for Jung than as a theorist of dreams whose approach could adequately fulfill the course objectives on its own. Freud is best known for his views on early childhood sexual development and the related theory of the triadic psyche (id, ego, and superego). Taken together, and with the help of a sophisticated theory of symbolism, these led Freud to propose his basic principle of dream interpretation: "When the work of interpretation has been completed the dream can be recognized as a *wish fulfillment*."ⁱⁱⁱ Freud's theory comes across as being extremely negative: our dreams, these harbingers of the unconscious drives that are destined to control much of our lives, are essentially waste-products, and the therapist's job is to help patients

overcome their negative influences, rather than to provide lasting insights into the meaning of their lives.

Jung, by contrast, introduces a deceptively similar, yet far more constructive principle of dream interpretation, called *compensation*: our dreams appear each night for our own good, as part of our psyche's natural tendency to seek balance. Our conscious thought naturally divides the world into opposites (e.g., good and evil, up and down, black and white);^{iv} in our waking life, we all tend to focus on *one side* of such dichotomies, to the exclusion of the other. Our unconscious then employs one of several strategies to show us what the neglected alternative is like in our dreams. Whereas Freud divided the psyche into three basic components, Jung saw it as composed of many basic features, called "archetypes", together constituting our psychic anatomy. The therapist's job is to know this anatomy and discover characteristics of each part, just as a medical doctor must know how each part of the body works. For Jung, the goal of interpreting dreams is to detect how various dream images symbolize different archetypes, functioning as steps on the path to *wholeness*.

The first of ten items on my standard grade sheet assesses the "quantity" of dream material in the first part of each entry (i.e., the dream text). This refers to the total number of dreams recorded and the frequency of dreams throughout the ten-week period. I apply a scale that translates the total number into a numerical score (e.g., 20 dreams earns the full 10 marks); but points are deducted for each period of more than 7 days with no dream, and either added or deducted if most dream texts are unusually long or short. Aside from deciding what "short" and "long" mean here, this first item is entirely objective: different students earn the same mark if they produce the same result.

The second item, "quality", refers to how well the student follows the formatting instructions given in the first chapter of the textbook. I assign one point for each of ten key formatting items. I keep a new dream diary of my own each time I teach the class, and use examples from my own dreams to illustrate the various theories. When presenting my own dreams, I state these formatting items clearly (e.g., the day and time of the dream); so any students who have read the textbook and pay attention in class can therefore easily recognize which items "count" for their grade.

Item three, the Glossary, requires students to identify each person who appears in their dream, either in notes at the end of each dream text, or gathered together at the end of the diary. (Most opt for the latter.) Students may use abbreviations to refer to people who appear in their dreams, to prevent classmates from knowing the identity of these persons. (Students share dreams in tutorial groups; I meet twice each semester with each group so I can directly assess each student's ability to apply the theories taught in class to their dreams.) Students using abbreviations must provide the full name in the Glossary.^v I assess the Glossary on completeness (length alone cannot be used, because some students have fewer persons appearing in their dreams); and average length of the entry for each person named. While this item is also partly

subjective, the material being assessed is objective, enabling students to challenge this grade, if they think it is lower than they deserve.^{vi}

Item four has two components, each worth five points: (a) patterns between different dreams; and (b) orderly structuring of the dream text. The first assesses how well students describe thematic similarities between different dreams. Of all the graded items, this is the one that students most commonly forget to do. To minimize the number of low grades for this item, I therefore offer students the opportunity to add a special “dream series” section at the end, explicitly examining themes that appear in multiple dreams.^{vii} Item 4(b), text structure, refers to Jung’s theory that every complete dream text can be written out with a fourfold structure. I do not require students to imitate this structure for *every* dream text; doing so could be impossible for very short texts, while very long texts might merit considerably more section divisions. Instead, I apply a scale that requires a certain percentage of dream texts to use Jung’s structuring, with others having *some* type of divisions in most cases. Using the same scale for everyone insures fairness in grading.

Items six to ten all assess the content of the interpretations. I assess each attempt to employ a particular method of interpretation by using a scale from one to five that rewards innovation, yet does so in an objective way, without being judgmental. Merely mentioning a particular technique’s name (e.g., “the dream is obviously a compensation”) earns one point. Indicating the relevant part of the dream text increases this to two points. Including some vague or partial insight into the dream’s relation to personal growth earns three points, or four points, if the insight is clearly expressed but not explicitly linked to a potential *change* in the student’s waking life. A student earns a perfect five only when the interpretation includes such a direct reference to some type of personal transformation (at least a potential one). After grading all dreams and assigning an individual number for each attempt to employ each type of interpretation, I add up all the numbers and apply the total to a pre-determined, sliding scale, thereby translating the numerical total into a grade on the overall ten point scale. For example, earning a perfect ten requires a total of at least 40 points, including at least one interpretation that was rated with a five.

Item five, literal interpretations, is normally the one with the highest number of students earning full credit. One need not take a class on dream interpretation to be able to connect dream images to waking life events, and to decide what relation a given image might have to one’s waking life; we tend to do this naturally. So my lectures do not focus much on this item, except to distinguish clearly between “literal” and “symbolic” (and the closely related concepts, “objective” and “subjective”), so that students will be aware of which type of interpretation they are presenting.

Item six, symbolic interpretations, is also commonly used even by those who have not had specific training. Most students who have previously interpreted dream symbols, however, simply look up the image in a book (or on a website) that claims to know what various symbols means. But Freud and Jung both strongly opposed such a practice, and so do I. To elucidate the

nature of symbolism, I distinguish between analytic logic (mainly of use in our waking life) and synthetic logic (the logic of dreams; see note 4). The key factor to remember is that a particular interpretation of a given image is only genuinely *symbolic* if it regards the image as something *other than* itself. So, for example, the statement “when I get angry at my roommate in my dream, that symbolizes the fact that I really did get angry at her last night, in my waking life”, should not be called a symbolic interpretation at all, but a *literal* interpretation. (I deduct a small number of points in the factoring of the above-mentioned five point scale whenever students make clear-cut *mistakes* of this sort.)

Items seven and eight are “Freudian wish-fulfillment” and “Jungian compensation”. Students do *not* need to force the wish-fulfillment option to have a sexual meaning, though it is fine if they do see this as a meaningful option. These two items are quite straightforward and fit well into the five-point assessment method.^{viii} At no point in grading these (or the other interpretation-based) items do I base my assessment of a specific interpretation on whether or not I agree with it; rather, I base it on the five-point scale mentioned above: if a student *attempts* to show how a perceived wish or a perceived compensation might lead them to modify their actions or shape their future personality in some way, they will be given full credit for that interpretation.

Item nine, “personality structure”, assesses any references to either Jung’s archetypes or Freud’s id, ego, and superego. Most students focus more on the former—a tendency I encourage by the fact that two whole chapters are devoted to the archetypes, whereas only part of one chapter is devoted to Freud’s triad. Of Jung’s many archetypes, the most important are the “shadow” and the “anima/animus”; when supplemented by the ego and the persona, they form a fourfold structure that provides the basis for what Jung calls the “Self” (i.e., the archetype of wholeness). An assessment method based on an expectation that certain specific growth goals were achieved would end up being inexorably subjective, because each student is at a different stage of personal development. Some students might never dream of their shadow, or might have already dealt with persona issues sufficiently so that they are quite properly not part of their dream diary. So instead of requiring students to cover everything, I assign equal credit (using the usual five point scale) to *any* reference to *any* of these personality structures arising out of a student’s dream. Provided they identify a few of these, and show how they are related to their dreams, they can earn full marks.

Item ten, “individuation”, is Jung’s technical term for personal growth: the process of becoming the individual you were meant to be. In this category I give some credit (e.g., two or three on the five-point scale) for insights or reflections relating to the student’s personality traits, reserving the higher marks (four and five) for comments that specifically identify a proposed (or accomplished) transformation from one character-trait to another. One week’s lectures (chapter 8 in the textbook) are devoted to Jung’s theory of personality types (the basis for the popular Myers-Briggs Test), so students are encouraged to comment on whether they are extravert or introvert, and whether their thinking or feeling (on the “judgment” side) and their sensation or intuition (on the “perceiving” side) are dominant. As usual, I do not assess whether they are

correct, but merely whether they have identified such traits and have attempted to see them as paths toward future growth.

When grading, I must continually remind myself not to base assessments on my personal judgment of whether the student's proposed interpretation has hit upon the most fruitful way of viewing each dream image. A creative interpretation that seems odd or lacking in relevance receives the same "five" grade as one that resonates deeply with my own personality. This is the only way to prevent subjectivity from creeping in to the assessment process. As a result, the final grade each student receives often does not correlate directly to the depth of self-understanding or lasting practical value that the project has contributed to each student. This might seem like a weakness of this method, but I regard it as one of its greatest strengths; for it frees students to "be themselves" when identifying the best meaning for each dream image. (Of course, I do provide feedback as needed, especially to point out errors in applying certain interpretive concepts. But I never state that a particular interpretation is "wrong". Over these many years, which are now drawing to a close,^{ix} I have often felt a sense of deep satisfaction and even awe at the privilege of peering into a side of my students' lives (and often into Chinese culture as well, since most of my students are Chinese), that few teachers ever experience.

Notes

¹ When I first took over this course from a retiring colleague in 1988, it was named "Psychology and Christianity". After a few years, when the department next revamped its General Education offerings, it was renamed "Religion, Psychology, and Personal Growth. After teaching the course approximately 10 times, I wrote a textbook entitled *Dreams of Wholeness: A course of introductory lectures on religion, psychology and personal growth* (Hong Kong: Philopsychy Press, 1997), which was revised and republished in 2008. References below are to the second edition.

¹ Near the beginning of every semester, I offer students the option of designing an alternative project that would be aimed at achieving the same goal, personal growth. I even direct their attention to the ten alternatives to dream interpretation that are listed in the textbook (see *Dreams of Wholeness*, pp.20-21). But up to now, no student has ever taken up this offer. Even students who at first claim they do not remember any dreams discover that it is a habit and/or skill that anyone can develop.

¹ Quoted in *Dreams of Wholeness*, p.66, from Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p.207.

¹ See my discussion of the distinction between analytic logic and synthetic logic, in *The Tree of Philosophy: A course of introductory lectures for beginning students of philosophy* (Hong Kong: Philopsychy Press, 2000), chapter 4.

¹ Further details on designing a good Glossary (or Notes) are provided in the first chapter of *Dreams of Wholeness*.

¹ One reason for the Glossary requirement is that the people in a dream almost always end up playing a key role in the symbolism; so the more careful one is in making a record of one's associations to those people, the deeper one's interpretations (see below) are likely to be.

¹ I assess this first half of item four using the same method described for items five to ten, below.

¹ Sometimes a student uses compensation and wish-fulfillment together, since they seem quite similar. In such cases, I assess the grade I would give the best usage, had it mentioned only *one* of the two, and then divide this into two smaller grades to reflect that the mark is being "shared" by two interpretations. To avoid this happening, I advise students advise to put wish-fulfillment interpretations in a separate paragraph from the compensation interpretations.

¹ HKBU recently revamped its GE programme. During that exercise, I submitted a proposal for a revised version of my dream interpretation course, but it was rejected by the small sub-committee selecting submissions from my Department. This stands as a warning that in some circles dream interpretation may not be considered a topic worthy of serious academic pursuit.