

READING IS NOT ESSENTIAL TO WRITING INSTRUCTION

Julie Myatt Barger

Writing teachers are fond of the adage “good readers are good writers,” but those same teachers frequently fail to assume responsibility for teaching students *how* to read. This often manifests itself in teaching only surface-level reading strategies in K–12 such as skimming and reading for the gist, and in cries of, “They should know this stuff before they get here!” at the university level. This abdication of responsibility has far-reaching effects for students, particularly those from underserved populations, leading them to believe they are poor readers rather than people who have not been taught to read deeply, thus potentially limiting their abilities to compete in a market characterized by ever-changing and increasingly competitive workplace literacies. This oversight is not malicious in intent but rather is the product of four key issues:

First, there exists an educational culture that privileges testing over sustained and meaningful encounters with texts. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation resulted in widespread testing that became a formidable obstacle to helping students develop deep reading skills. As teachers understandably grew fearful about losing their jobs because of low test scores, they devoted class time to preparing students for the tests rather than developing practices that would have helped students improve as readers and writers. Standardized tests often rely on multiple-choice responses that neither allow for complexity of thought nor invite students to draw connections between the text under consideration and their own experiences. In the era of NCLB, these tests typically required readings of short, acontextual passages generated by the testing companies instead of existing publications that, when paired with the right questions, could have allowed students to draw meaningful

connections between the larger cultural context and the choices the author made in constructing the text. For example, an English III (junior-level) practice test published by Pearson for the State of Tennessee Department of Education in 2012 included 49 multiple-choice questions asking students to identify correct punctuation, combine or rearrange sentences, and determine the meaning of specialized vocabulary. The practice test prompted students to demonstrate reading proficiency by identifying the main idea of a passage, evaluating forms of evidence, and assessing a source's validity, but nowhere were students asked to demonstrate their ability to "analyze texts to identify the author's attitudes, viewpoints, and beliefs and to critique how these relate to the larger historical, social, and cultural contexts of the texts," even though this kind of rhetorical reading was, as evident on a teacher webpage, identified as a course-level expectation in the Tennessee Language Arts Standards. Students may not have had sufficient engagement of this sort with text because the acontextual, ahistorical test-generated passages did not invite rhetorical reading.

Second, there have been longstanding debates in the field of composition studies about the purpose of first-year composition (FYC), the writing course required of almost all university students, including what role reading should play in the teaching of writing. Ellen C. Carillo explains in *Securing a Place for Reading in Composition* that reading instruction hasn't been as prominent a feature of the first-year writing classroom as it should have been largely because of debates in the field about what kinds of readings should be assigned. Probably the most famous debate surrounding reading in the writing classroom (known as the Tate–Lindemann debate) addressed the issue of whether or not literary texts are appropriate for use in FYC. In this exchange, Gary Tate represented the position that FYC should exclude no texts, articulating his commitment to preparing students for the conversations they would have in their lives beyond the university and his concerns that in its emphasis on academic discourse, FYC had become a service course for other academic disciplines. Erika Lindemann proposed that the purpose of FYC is to introduce students to academic and professional discourse through a rhetorical approach to writing, complete with instruction in genre, style, purpose, and audience. Lindemann expressed concerns that using literature in the composition classroom relegated student writing to the margins and reduced the academy to one genre—the essay—thus failing to prepare students for future writing tasks. Both Carillo and

Sharon Crowley characterize this debate as a product of tensions surrounding the uneasy relationship between FYC and literature. Distancing the composition classroom from literature left reading out in the cold, resulting in less attention to reading instruction in the FYC classroom. Though many composition studies scholars would contend that differentiating what happens in FYC from what occurs in a literature course was a necessary step in the development of our discipline, it appears that in the process of defining ourselves, we lost sight of how very important reading instruction is to the teaching of writing.

Third, there is a lack of recent research on reading in the field of composition studies and a gap in teacher training, particularly at the university level. The majority of research on reading in the field of composition was published over 20 years ago. As a result, those teaching introductory writing classes are, as Linda Adler-Kassner and Heidi Estrem note, seldom introduced to theories of teaching reading, so they do not feel equipped to make explicit reading instruction part of their teaching. Carillo calls this “a pedagogical gap” in which “instructors lack the resources to develop reading pedagogies that will complement their writing pedagogies.”

Finally, there have been unrealistic demands placed on FYC instructors charged with preparing students to conduct research and write in all disciplines. Many people, among them university faculty outside of composition, tend to expect FYC—in the course of just one or two semesters—to remake students into writers capable of conducting research and writing for their chosen fields of study. Though scholars such as Elizabeth Wardle have challenged the notion that FYC should prepare students for work in their disciplines, arguing instead that the course should expose students to theories of writing so they can understand how writing works, the course remains overburdened, with reading increasingly neglected. This FYC-as-general-academic-literacy-inoculation encourages students to view reading as just another requirement, rather than as an opportunity for discovery and an important form of knowledge making. Take, for example, the research paper, a staple in this model of FYC. All too often, this assignment has no audience other than the teacher, no purpose beyond earning a grade, leaving students with little motivation to locate quality sources and use them thoughtfully.

Misconceptions about what writing is and debates about the purpose of FYC distract from what should be writing teachers’ primary goal, what Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and

Kara Taczak have in their book *Writing Across Contexts* characterized as teaching students to think like writers. An important part of that is teaching students how to read like writers, as Mike Bunn illustrates in “How to Read Like a Writer.” Despite instructors’ recognition that reading and writing are interconnected, reading instruction all too often receives short shrift in the writing classroom, with instructors failing to offer explicit instruction in a variety of reading strategies, instead promoting content-based readings that emphasize a text’s meaning over attention to how it was constructed. Worse yet, instructors may even supply the meaning for students, many of whom expect their instructors to do just that.

The emphasis on content-based readings that resemble literary analysis is a product of instructors’ own familiarity with literary analysis, as those teaching writing are often former English majors who tend to be more well-versed in literary critiques (in which the emphasis is on what is written in a fictional text) than in rhetorical analyses (in which the emphasis is on the choices the writer made in attempting to achieve a particular purpose and how those choices influence the ways various audiences respond to the text).

Composition scholars readily agree that students need to be taught how to write rather than merely be tasked with writing. High school English language arts teacher and author Kelly Gallagher argues that the same is true of reading: “If we simply assign reading instead of teaching students how to read, we’ll get poor reading”—and, I would add, poor writing. So what exactly should reading instruction involve? To demystify reading and support students in learning to read like writers, writing teachers must:

- Introduce students to the concept that reading, like writing, is a recursive process, meaning that the act of reading is not linear or straightforwardly sequential but instead demands that readers revisit various points in their reading multiple times throughout the process;
- Acknowledge their reading difficulties and guide students in assessing their own reading struggles;
- Share strategies and provide heuristics—or interactive techniques that promote discovery—that help students read actively, work through confusion, make inferences, and connect the text to their own experiences and ideas (see, for example, Mike Bunn’s “How to Read Like a Writer”);
- Promote collaboration that gets students talking about their reading experiences and exposes them to others’ questions, perspectives, and interpretations;

- Assign a wide variety of texts students can use as models for their own writing;
- Guide students in reading rhetorically (analyzing texts not for meaning as one would in a literature class but rather to determine how and why the texts were constructed as they were by asking what the context surrounding the writing is, who the intended audience is, what the author's purpose is, and what effect the author's choices have on the audience);
- Invite students to ask questions of texts, both models and those they compose themselves, in order to consider what the author could have done differently, as well as how these changes could influence the reader's relationship to the text;
- Create a mechanism for students to reflect on their reading experiences, consider how their reading benefits their writing, and envision how the skills they are developing could be of use to them beyond the writing classroom.

Of course, even explicit reading instruction in a writing-intensive classroom will not benefit students fully if they are unable to recognize how their reading can help them improve as writers. Explicit writing instruction that makes students aware of the interconnected nature of reading and writing benefits students in numerous ways:

- It leads to increased investment where students are more likely to take responsibility for learning to read carefully and critically, thus gaining more from the learning experience.
- It helps students understand how to use sources in meaningful, responsible ways because students spend time building a relationship between the secondary sources they are reading and the research-based writing they produce.
- It helps students understand that writing is rarely formulaic due to the range of texts with differing rhetorical situations they might study in a reading-writing curriculum.
- It gives students models to emulate in their own writing due to this breadth of reading materials.
- It helps students draw from prior knowledge and transfer their skills in the future.

Several of the benefits described above run parallel to the *habits of mind* introduced in the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, developed by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project. These habits of mind include openness, engagement,

responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition, the latter of which is defined as thinking about one's thinking. These ways of approaching learning are important because the reality is that what occurs in the writing classroom is merely the beginning; for students to be successful in meeting the reading and writing demands of their future lives and careers, they must claim ownership over their own learning, be open to new possibilities, and be willing to adapt to the new situations they encounter.

By failing to give reading its due, we are blocking students' access to avenues of inquiry that would support their growth as readers, writers, and thinkers. In an era characterized by changing workplace literacies and the birth of new genres inspired by Web 2.0 technologies (such as wikis, blogs, and social networking sites), a flexible rhetorical education is more necessary than ever. The goal informing writing instruction at all levels should be for students to develop not only the skills that will serve them in the academic realm but also the ability to ask the questions and cultivate the behaviors that will allow them to respond effectively to the diverse composing contexts they will encounter in their future lives and careers beyond the classroom. Parents, students, and policy-makers should expect reading, specifically reading actively, collaboratively, rhetorically, and with an eye toward one's own writing, to be a significant part of writing instruction at all levels.

Further Reading

For more about how and why reading is taught as it is in FYC classes, see Linda Adler-Kassner and Heidi Estrem's "Reading Practices in the Writing Classroom" (*WPA Journal*) and Ellen Carillo's *Securing a Place for Reading in Composition*. Rebecca Moore Howard, Tricia Serviss, and Tonya K. Rodrigue's "Writing from Sources, Writing from Sentences" uses data gathered from university students' research papers to support the authors' assertion that educators in all disciplines who assign research writing should provide instruction in how to read and use sources. Colorado State University's *WAC Clearinghouse* is an open-access publisher featuring books and journal articles designed to support instructors in all disciplines in teaching reading and writing.

Mike Bunn's *Writing Spaces* chapter "How to Read Like a Writer" introduces students to the concept that texts are the product of writers' choices and can be studied as models for students' own writing; its inclusion of questions students can apply to texts they

read helps students learn how to read rhetorically (also see other helpful *Writing Spaces* readings for students). Kelly Gallagher's webpage (<http://www.kellygallagher.org>) is directed toward English language arts instructors and offers concrete advice on how to help students discover the enjoyment reading offers even as they work to develop productive reading practices.

Just as people's reading and writing habits change with evolving technologies and social practices, the teaching of reading and writing evolves as we learn more about how people read and write. Numerous writing studies scholars have documented how attitudes toward students, learning, and writing itself have influenced writing instruction. They include Sharon Crowley, whose *Composition in the University* offers an excellent overview of the political implications of literacy instruction. The Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and National Writing Project's *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* identifies behaviors students must cultivate in order to succeed beyond the university, and Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle's *Naming What We Know* (Utah State University Press) offers a comprehensive yet accessible account of what researchers learned about how people write, how writing functions, and how writing should be taught.

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