

Making Reading Visible in the Classroom

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Abstract

Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines programs have changed the face of instruction. Missing from these programs—both in name and often in practice— is a focus on reading. Writing remains disconnected from reading, its counterpart in the process of composing meaning. This paper addresses the difficulty posed by teaching reading since instructors cannot actually see reading in the way that they see their students' writing. This piece details an assignment that in its focus on the process of reading actually makes reading visible, thus having the potential to help students in all fields become not only better writers, but better readers.

Keywords

reading pedagogy, writing pedagogy, Writing Across the Curriculum, Writing in the Disciplines, difficulty

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Introduction

Robert Scholes (2002) has characterized our attitude toward the teaching of writing as compared to the teaching of reading:

We normally acknowledge, however grudgingly, that writing must be taught and continue to be taught from high school to college and perhaps beyond. We accept it, I believe, because we can see writing, and we know that much of the writing we see is not good enough. But we do not see reading. We see some writing about reading, to be sure, but we do not see reading. I am certain, though, that if we could see it, we would be appalled. (p. 166)

In this passage, Scholes raises a range of issues—from the relationship of writing to reading to the differing expectations of high school and college reading. Most interesting to me, though, as someone committed to emphasizing the connections between reading and writing in my classroom, is the implicit challenge Scholes poses here: the challenge to find ways of making reading visible so that we can help our students develop not only as writers, but as readers.

While most of us would agree that this development goes hand in hand—students become better writers because they are also becoming better readers and vice versa—we tend to ignore this connection as we continue to privilege writing by devoting more class time to writing than to reading. We also assign projects that allow us to see (or perhaps we only focus on) our students' writing as opposed to their reading. And, despite the fact that our students' writing is comprised of interpretations—readings!—the reading itself seems far more elusive and thus more difficult to comment upon than the writing. We may tell our students that we expect active reading and marked-up texts, and we are often rebutted with concerns about selling books back to the campus bookstore or to amazon.com, neither of which will purchase books that are covered in “scribble” and highlighting. So how can we make our students better readers? What might we do to enable ourselves to see our students' reading so that we can help them achieve this goal? I certainly don't have the answer to this. An answer, though, comes in the form of an assignment that has made reading visible in my classroom and has the potential to make reading visible in classrooms across the disciplines.

I come from an English department, a department like most across the country that is marked by a divide between writing and reading. For us, this divide is represented by the separation of the composing process (writing) and the reading process (literature) in our curricula. Students take either composition courses (writing) or literature courses (reading courses). However, reading is as much a process of composing as is writing, and I have worked especially hard try to bridge this unnatural divide in my own courses. Now, as I work with instructors from a range of disciplines—many of whom are charged with integrating writing into their courses—I try to show them how their teaching and their students can benefit from a focus on the connections between these practices.

Connecting Reading and Writing Through the Passage-Based Paper

I have a range of assignments in class and out of class that attempt to make reading visible, but the one that seems most malleable to most disciplines is one that I call the passage-based paper (PBP for short).¹ The following assignment, which students are given frequently throughout the term, is distributed to them at the start of the semester:

WHAT IS A PASSAGE-BASED PAPER (PBP)?

Throughout the course of the semester, I will ask that you choose a short passage (3-5 sentences) from the text that we are reading and write a 1-2 page passage-based paper on this excerpt. You will be expected to discuss this passage in class and hand in the assignment at the end of class.

Format: Transcribe the passage onto the top of the page (including the page number from which the passage is taken), and then “unpack” the passage, paying close attention to the textual elements, including the passage's language, tone, and construction. Once you have examined the passage closely, conclude your paper by connecting this passage to the rest of the work. In other words, once you have completed a close, textual analysis of your passage, contemplate the meaning of the passage and its place in or contribution to the meaning(s) of the text as a whole.

Purpose: Passage-based papers offer you the opportunity to experience the connections between the interpretive practices of reading and writing. These papers give you the opportunity to engage in close textual analysis and to grapple

¹ I was introduced to a version of this assignment more than a decade ago by one of my professors, Dr. James Bloom at Muhlenberg College, whose pedagogy continues to inspire my own.

with difficult ideas that come up in the texts that we will be reading. I am concerned primarily with your ability to work closely with the texts that we are reading. We are working with difficult texts, and it is fine if your papers represent an attempt at developing an argument through close analysis of a passage as opposed to a fully-developed argument. These passage-based papers also prepare you for writing formal essays in which you will be expected to attend to textual evidence as carefully as you attend to the passages you choose for your passage-based papers.

Preparation and Support: At the beginning of the term, we will work together on writing passage-based papers. We will discuss strategies for choosing a passage and completing these assignments. You will receive feedback on your PBPs from me, as well as from your peers.

My PBP prompt has gone through multiple permutations over the last eight years that I have been using it. I have revised it to be less directive and more directive, as well as less and more detailed. In some instances, I have tailored it to a specific course and added components that seemed relevant and useful in that particular context. Most recently, I have added the "Purpose" section to make my pedagogy transparent. Just as important, this addition gives students a sense of why they are doing what they are doing, especially because this type of assignment—which they initially read as a response paper—is very foreign to them. While the PBP resembles a response paper in its length and in the frequency with which I assign it, the resemblance ends there. Notice there is no space here that asks students for their opinion, their response, or anything like that. In fact, I usually hold writing workshops at the beginning of the semester in order to look at examples of students' PBPs so that I can emphasize that a PBP is not a response paper that asks students for their opin-

ions, reactions, or feelings about the text. While we could debate the place of students' personal responses in any course, this specific assignment asks students to focus solely on the text and the textual elements therein and has them participate in the act of transcribing the passage in order to emphasize that this—and nothing else—is to be the focus of their inquiry.

A challenge for most students in part because they are far more accustomed to traditional response papers, the PBP gives students the opportunity to offer a sustained reading of a short excerpt, to single out a passage they believe to be rich with meaning and then offer a reading that is based on the elements present in that passage. The passage-based paper allows me to see and comment upon students' reading practices. And, because we are working with a very small portion of text, my comments are necessarily specific in nature as I respond to a student's very local reading. Keeping reading this contained, I am able to see how students proceed in their readings: how they move from looking at certain words and phrases to making claims about them. This assignment makes them slow down and become aware of the process by which they make meaning, and it allows me to see and comment on this meaning-making.

The assignment also allows students to see how their classmates are reading, since their passage-based papers guide our discussions. Often, two or more students will choose the same passage and interpret it differently, yet each interpretation is valid—the students just chose to focus on different textual elements. This allows us to discuss the potential for multiple and even competing readings of the same passage. Sometimes a reading will be completely unsustainable based on the passage or on the ways in which the student has attended to the passage, and that allows us to talk about the limits of interpretation and the importance of connecting evidence to claims.

Adapting the PBP to Disciplines Outside of English²

This is all well and good for English, you may be thinking, but how does one make reading visible outside of English and outside of the humanities? How can I make my Biology students better readers?

Notice that the PBP prompt doesn't ask students to address anything particularly "literary" about the passage they have chosen. Instead, the assignment asks students to comment on the relationship between language, style, and meaning, which is relevant in all disciplines, particularly for students who are both learning to recognize and imitate how writers in that discipline write.

If your students read journals within the field they can choose a passage from one of those. In their four-year, cross-disciplinary study of student writers and instructors from across the disciplines, Chris Thaiss and Terry Myers Zawacki (2006) found that "students can infer style by reading professional writing" (p. 128). While inferring is certainly useful, the PBP asks student to do far more than that. A student in the sciences may pay particular attention to the science-writer's abstract. Students might comment on the tone, style, and/or structure of a passage from the abstract. Students might write about how this passage differs from the article as a whole in terms of style, diction, and structure. Students might choose to focus on the introduction or conclusion to a published laboratory report and write about the textual elements therein, making them aware of the different components of a lab report. You could even use a lab report written by a student to help model the sort of writing you are looking for in the course. While the focus here seems to be on writing rather than reading, it is actually through their close readings of these passages that students learn about the conventions that govern writing within that discipline. Moreover, noticing and writing about these textual elements help reveal

for students their processes of reading and make them aware of the fact that they, as writers, will necessarily need to keep readers in mind.

Another way to tweak the PBP, while keeping its focus on a limited amount of text, is to have students choose a difficult passage and write about it in order to make sense of it, in order to develop a reading. Mariolina Salvatori and Patricia Donahue (2006) have written extensively on the importance of having students dwell on (rather than ignore) the difficulties they encounter while reading. Salvatori and Donahue have described how entering the text through this difficulty (whether the difficulty stems from vocabulary, references, or an unfamiliar concept) can be a productive route for students to take because it makes them aware of the work that readers must do when interpreting a text. In the introduction to their book, they speak directly to students, telling them that the purpose of the book is "to help you inquire into whatever intellectual difficulties you might encounter in your work as a college student. Inquiry into difficulty is an important dimension of both academic work and human understanding—a fact that our students' writing has confirmed over and over again" (p. xxii). Beyond connecting the processes of reading and writing to human understanding, this emphasis on difficulty also helps students, in the words of David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky (1986), "to see difficulty as a condition of adult reading, as a gift that makes reading possible" (p. 18).

Taking the "difficulty paper" beyond the humanities might mean having students locate a passage that creates a set of questions for them, questions that they don't have the means (e.g., data, results from other studies or experiments, and so on) to answer quite yet. Students can use the passage to develop the questions so that they can consider what information it is that they need in order to answer the questions that the passages have raised for them. In the process, students become aware of their difficulties and rather than find-

2 Many thanks to Dr. Beth Matway at the University of Pittsburgh for helping me to think beyond English.

ing them prohibitive, they become generative and promote understanding as the student “wrestles”—to use Peter Elbow’s term for this type of work—with the text and the concepts therein.

In all of these cases, students are being made aware of their own reading practices by working through a small portion of text and using writing to figure out what’s going on in it (or where else they might need to go to figure this out). The length of the passage with which students are working is perhaps the most important element of this assignment no matter how you choose to adapt it for your course. A short passage is important not only because reading and writing—especially if it is a particularly difficult text—seem less overwhelming, but because the limited text demands that student and teacher alike both slow down and become acutely aware of their interpretive processes. For the student, this means becoming aware of what it feels like to actively make sense of something. And, for the instructor, it means the opportunity both to see students’ processes and to intervene in productive ways in those processes.

The instructor also becomes responsible for showing students how the PBP is related to the work of the course. Ideally, the PBP is part of a sequence of assignments. The PBP may help students prepare for writing longer works and for the close attention to textual evidence expected in longer, formal papers. Or, the PBP may help students discover what questions need to be answered or what information needs to be collected before they can complete another assignment in the sequence. Alternatively, the PBP can be used to address how students might work closely with sources in preparation for research assignments that will ask them to do this work on a much larger scale. Students should be made aware of the PBP’s connections to other assignments and to the goals of the course so that PBPs don’t appear as though they are discrete assignments that are

unrelated to—and therefore less important than—the rest of the work completed in the course.

Ultimately, the PBP helps students experience not just writing, but reading as an act of discovery. As they read, not only can students inquire into the content of a range of fields but, through attention to their own reading practices, they can better “appreciate the rhetorical differences that distinguish one discipline from another” (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006, p. 129). We need to instruct our students on what they might look for when they read in the disciplines so that they can better understand the content, become better writers, and, perhaps most importantly, become better readers in the (sometimes multiple) fields within which they are working. ■■

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