Reading Practices in the Writing Classroom

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> "How can I work with readings without pushing students toward a literary analysis? I started thinking about that with this week's readings—I realized that I am. Really, I'm beginning to change my attitude toward thinking analytically about texts. I see now that we're not pushing for literary analysis, or at least the kind of analysis that I'm used to doing as an English major.
>
> —graduate teaching assistant, Fall 2005

As WPAs, we've seen the pedagogical tensions that often result when first-year students' and writing instructors' various assumptions about reading collide in the first-year writing classroom. Why don't my students read as I want them to?, the instructor wonders. Why doesn't my teacher just tell me what he wants?, students think. Writing instructors like the one quoted above know that teaching writing is closely intertwined with teaching reading, yet many are stymied by how to engage productively with reading in the classroom. For some, the pull of literary analysis is especially strong. For others, the curricular demands of a course like first-year writing leave little space for actual reading instruction, since so much attention must be paid to a host of writing needs. But carefully considering what we ask students to read, how we ask them to read it, and why, is an essential aspect of writing program administration. As we thought through how various models of what reading is came into contact within the context of our own writing program, we realized that we needed to devote the same attention to identifying components and conventions of reading and reading processes as we did with writing.

Of course, our program (as with any site of learning) inevitably reflects and enacts various sets of values: personal, programmatic, disciplinary, and institutional. These structures for learning are not neutral, as Richard Miller has pointed out; they also are shaped by the exigencies in which we

(teachers, programs, WPAs) exist and, to varying degrees, reflect the values embedded in those larger structures. Thus, in studying the ways we asked students to read, we also were querying the degrees to which we were (and are) perpetuating larger values. Connections between the act of reading and the settings where reading takes place have been explored by others in composition, of course: Mariolina Salvatori has investigated the issues surrounding reading and exigency most extensively and engagingly in articles like "Conversations with Texts" and "Reading Difficulties"; Kathleen McCormick's *The Culture of Reading and the Teaching of English* also takes up questions related to reading and context in the college English classroom. There is work on the relationship between instructors' reading of students' work and context (for example, Richard Straub's *Twelve Readers Reading*, Brian Huot's *(Re)Assessing Writing* and Kathleen Blake Yancey's *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*, as well as studies of teachers' comments like Smith's and even Connors and Lunsford's).

Studies that focus on contexts that *instructors* create for students' reading, though, are few and far between. Thus, at the same time as instructors ask for more explicit guidance with reading pedagogy, that pedagogy is rarely included in composition research, graduate composition courses, or first-year writing program development materials. In a recent article on the role of reading in composition pedagogy, Patricia Harkin begins by quoting Gary Ettari and Heather C. Easterling, editors of a special issue of *Reader*, who noted that "even though reading is 'one of the central activities' of English studies, their graduate preparation has omitted explicit discussion of 'making sense […] of what happens when we read'" (410). This omission points to the inattention in composition graduate programs to reading pioneers like Louise Rosenblatt, Wolfgang Iser, or even David Bleich's reader response work; yet the influence of these theorists' ideas has surely left a largely unexamined (and sometimes unacknowledged) mark on composition pedagogy. Even a recent collection focused on the composition practicum includes little about helping new instructors develop reading pedagogies for first-year writing (as a lone example, see Guerra and Bawarshi). Ironically, in fact, the majority of work focused on attempting to articulate various strategies for active, engaged reading is found in the prefaces and supporting material within composition readers (a few examples are Blau and Burak, Bartholomae and Petrosky, Trimbur, Carter and Gradin, Ballenger and Payne).[1]

Reading and Readers' Roles: Paradoxical Definitions

While reading pedagogy within the composition literature is not particularly well-developed, "critical reading" is one of the primary headings of the

WPA Outcomes Statement. In the Outcomes Statement, as in other pedagogical materials that focus on reading, reading as an activity and the roles that readers play within that activity are conflated, perhaps because cleaving the roles that individuals play to achieve an outcome from the outcome itself seems unnecessarily artificial. The act of reading, for instance, is referenced [along with writing] as a tool for "inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating; the outcome for "Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing" references the roles that students should play as readers when it notes that "by the end of first year composition," critical readers should "integrate their own ideas with those of others" (OS).

Within our own program outcomes, too, reading and students' roles as readers are blended. Our outcomes statement uses the WPA statement as a foundation but also adds to it, noting that successful students should:

- Use writing and discussion to work through and interpret complex ideas from readings and other texts (reading and roles)

- Critically analyze their own and others' choices regarding language and form (roles)

- Engage in multiple modes of inquiry using text (reading)

- Consider and express the relationship to of their own ideas to the ideas of others (roles)

These outcomes are supported by and reflected in references to reading in our general curriculum guide, which also blends activity and roles. For instance, the guide notes that "every activity [in your class]should help students move toward entering into a dialogue with the reading/s in their writing…. Remind students that in their writing, they need to incorporate reading/s that help readers [of their essays] to understand how they see what they see in the reading—this means *using evidence,* and *explaining what the evidence they have used demonstrates"* (CG, emphasis in original). As in the OS, then, "good reading" is evidenced by a dialogue between the writer's ideas and those in the text she is using, as well as an understanding, demonstrated through writing, of the conventions of source use—from interpretation to citational practices.

These pedagogical guidelines draw upon conceptions of reading and readers' roles that are foundational in composition studies, especially the idea that to produce a successful reading, readers must engage in a dialogue between genre conventions and their ideas (see, for instance, Bahktin; Miller; Bazerman; Freedman and Medway; Bawarshi).

In addition to engaging with these forms, though, our programmatic outcomes also involve engaging in reflexive analysis of the reading act and situating it within the ideologies and values of the contexts where that read-

ing is being performed—the specific class; the First-Year Writing Program; our university as an entity; the academy as an institution. These contexts are analogous to the "sponsors of literacy" identified by Deborah Brandt, "agents … who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way" (166). Just as sponsors shape what is considered to be acceptable and/or appropriate, so classroom contexts reflect particular notions of "good reading." As James Gee has argued, there is always "a way (or *the* way) of reading a text," and that way "is *only* acquired … by one's being embedded (or apprenticed) as a member of a social practice wherein people not only read texts of this type in this way, but also talk about such texts in certain ways, hold certain attitudes and values about them, and socially interact over them in certain ways" (39-41). Good reading involves at least an awareness that interacting with and interpreting text is not neutral, that it is always "sponsored." But this definition also suggests that readers must play an active role in "good reading." Ideally, they will analyze the ideals and values associated with the "sponsoring" situation at the same time as they consider how their own contexts and experiences affect their interpretations of the texts being read. This conception of "good reading" is repeated in some first-year writing materials, as well, where readers are framed as active participants in the reading process (e.g., Bartholomae and Petrosky; Ballenger and Payne; Maasik and Solomon; Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein; Gradin and Carter). Kathleen McCormick also notes that "most researchers … from a variety of disciplines and perspectives—[regard reading] as a complex, active process" (3).

But at the same time that programs like ours strive to create an active reader and include "activity" in our definitions of a "good reader," public representations construe writers as almost entirely passive. Concurrently, the concept of the passive reader is pervasive in mainstream culture (e.g., Salvatori, McCormick). Consider, for example, the 2004 NEA report *Reading at Risk,* which contends that book reading has dropped off among American adult readers, literary reading even more quickly. In 1992, according to the report, 53.3 percent of readers between 18 and 24 said they engaged in literary reading; by 2002 42.8 percent of the readers surveyed in that age demographic said that they did (x-xi). According to NEA Chair Dana Gioia, rather than read books, readers are interacting with texts that are removing them from the reading process:

> Reading a book requires a degree of active attention and engagement. Indeed, reading itself is a progressive skill that depends on years of education and practice. By contrast, electronic media such as television, recordings, and radio make

> fewer demands on their audiences, and indeed require no more than passive participation. Even interactive electronic media, such as video games and the Internet, foster shorter attention spans and accelerated gratification. (7)

Representations like the one in the report, which reflect a dominant conception of readers (and students) that is prevalent among discussions of "what students are like," perpetuate a longstanding narrative about students that continues to circulate through reports like this one, as well as mainstream media stories about "why Johnny can't read." Like all frames, though, they exclude other narratives and interpretations (e.g., students are interacting with alternative texts and new media [see Gee, "Video"; also Yancey]). Even more disturbing for our immediate purposes, though, they invariably reflect and contribute to what Sheridan Blau calls "the culture of interpretive dependence," the assumption by teachers that their role is to tell students what reading is about—and the concomitant assumption by students that their role is to be *told* what reading is about (20-24).

Perhaps most troubling, these are also the representations of readers that many first-year writing instructors expect students in first-year writing classes to play (perhaps because they themselves have occupied those roles). For example—and despite the careful work that we do with reading in our own composition practicum before the semester begins—we have seen many new graduate instructors fall back into a way of teaching that constructs students as passive readers. One example of many will illustrate: last semester, a very smart and promising instructor asked Linda to observe how involved students were in class discussion because he was worried that they were not particularly engaged. During her visit to the class, it quickly became clear that this was because he was doing the work of the reading for them—asking questions to which he knew the answer, telling students what readings were about, and elaborating on their responses when they did speak. Examples like this, coupled with documents like the NEA report, point to the critical need for composition instructors to carefully define how we want students to be as readers, and *why,* within the framework of reading and writing in our classes, programs, and profession, participating in these ways is important for them as readers and writers. Leaving this work undone, undefined, unstated leaves yet another gap into which others can come and say, "here's how you should do your work."

To begin addressing the need for more theorized reading pedagogy in the context of first-year writing programs, we have used our own program to explore three issues that seem critical: how "reading" and "readers' roles" have been articulated; how reading practices are enacted in particular ways; and how metaphors of "performance" and "genre"—both of which are fre-

quently invoked in references to *writing* practices—can be useful for fram-
ing reading practices and processes in the composition class.

Reading in First-Year Writing

We have been concerned about these twin issues of defining (viable) reading
pedagogies and contributing to public discussions about readers' roles for
several years. To address them we have collected artifacts from our first-year
writing program (writing heuristics, research guides, assignment sheets)
and conducted teaching observations with an eye towards how reading is
enacted in our program. We've continually asked the question: "When we
ask students to read, what are we *really* asking them to do?"

It's important to note here that we have not asked *how* students read—
that is, we are not asking how students interpret or use readings. Rather,
we are interested in how "directions" for reading attempt to shape the roles
that students play in reading and what ideological implications accompany
those attempts.

When we turned our attention to these questions, we discovered a
potential discrepancy that gave us much cause for concern. We did not
want readers at our institution to be represented as passive; we did want to
articulate a reading pedagogy that was both grounded in best practices in
the field and pedagogically defensible within our own institution. However,
in hearing about and looking at specific classroom-based materials, it was
evident that the larger programmatic goals were not yet reflected in them.
Instructors wanted students to read for particular purposes, although they
could not always identify those purposes. Reading heuristics—reading
questions, prereading prompts, or class activities—often reflected other
purposes. Perhaps students didn't always read the texts in the ways instruc-
tors expected them to; sometimes this resulted in frustrated students and
flummoxed instructors.

At the same time, there were patterns within these pedagogical materials
that led us to outline three relatively clear purposes for reading within the
program. *Content-based* reading, the kind of reading with which students
are most familiar, asks students to summarize and interpret, to consider
connections between ideas, and to use reading to develop ideas. *Process-
based* reading focuses on the work of the writer/researcher, scrutinizing the
text to look at the decisions made by the writer in the process of textual
production as a possible model for students' own writing/research work.
Structure-based reading asks students to focus on the conventions reflected
in and used to shape content; the emphasis is on developing genre aware-
ness so that student writers can make conscious decisions about how to use

different genres and conventions, and can make conscious choices about how, when, or whether to use them. (For a more elaborated description of each of these approaches see Adler-Kassner and Estrem, "View"; for more on the connection between these approaches and overall program outcomes see Adler-Kassner and Estrem, "Reaching Out"). Identifying these reading approaches has provided an extraordinarily productive strategy for talking about reading with writing program instructors. Although we (and they) stress that these reading purposes are rarely as discrete as they are when described separately as we have done here, these descriptions allow us to consider (in our own teaching and our work with instructors) what each cultivates (and does not), what is privileged (and not privileged) in each, and how we can use each individually or in concert with another to emphasize different aspects of reading work. However, in taking an additional step back and examining these approaches to reading, we have realized that we also incorporate a fourth approach that we will describe below.

Challenging Purposes

Extending from the three reading purposes above to consider notions of sponsorship surrounding them is also a crucial step in challenging the received ideas about reading that often accompany instructors into the classroom. These ideas range from the role of the teacher (like the expectation that they will be teaching literary analysis, as in the quote that opened this essay) to the roles that readers (students) will play (like the passive reader described in the NEA report). Situating the challenge in the idea of sponsorship is particularly important as well, because it raises composition's frequently-repeated goal of finding a "third space" that can balance the perpetual tension between "inventing the university"—cultivating students' acumen with conventions associated with academic genres while incorporating their ideas into them—and the desire to challenge the ideologies that are maintained by those genres at the same time (Bartholomae; also see Spellmeyer; Bizzell; Royster; Barwashi). For this purpose, three conceptions of language running through 19th and 20th century linguistics outlined by William Hanks in his book, *Language and Communicative Practices,* are particularly useful because they contribute to a framework that can help elucidate the connections between these reading approaches and their sponsoring contexts by focusing on the relationships among language, readers, and texts in each approach.[2]

The first conception of language outlined by Hanks is "irreducibility," the set of theories that position language as a system, "a [self-contained] structure and evolution [that] cannot be explained by appeals to nonlin-

guistic behavior, to emotion, desire, psychology, rationality, strategy, social structure, or indeed any other phenomenon outside of the linguistic fact itself" (6). Elements of irreducibility are present in content, process, and structure-based reading; however, they are especially strong in structure-based reading because of its strong focus on the analysis of genre conventions. Given the relatively rigid nature of irreducible conceptions of language—there is little room here for the presence of a reader, much less experiences and/or ideologies brought by readers to their work—a writing program that privileges the kind of challenge outlined above would likely be best advised to incorporate reading purposes that reflect this conception of language judiciously.

Hanks next discusses "relationality," theories that posit that language and meaning are grounded in specific circumstances—"not what could be said under all imaginable conditions but what is said under given ones…"(Hanks 7-8). With their privileging of the listener/reader/interpreter, relational approaches stand in almost diametrical opposition to irreducible approaches to language. Content-based readings that privilege the reader's interpretation, for example (like reader-response criticism in literary theory), reflect these same conceptualizations of language. Unlike reading approaches that reflect irreducible approaches to language, relational ones provide comfortable accommodations for the reader's ideas, experiences, and can thus help students find their ways into reading. However, incorporated too liberally, they also may communicate misleading ideas about the degree of flexibility for textual interpretation in the academy. Not *all* readings are tolerated, or even welcomed (see, for example, Miller "Fault Lines"; also Blau). Thus, again, a writing program that wants to help students balance their own ideas and an awareness that *all* communication takes place within genre, and all genres are bounded by conventions (Bawarshi) would be wise to consider how, strategically, to use such approaches.

The final conception of language outlined by Hanks is "practice-based." This idea acknowledges that language is a system that contains and generates meaning, while at the same time users employ that system based upon their understandings of the contexts where it is used. In this sense, then, "practice" brings together the sense of language *as* a system while at the same time reflecting the user's circumstances and her understanding of those circumstances as it is filtered through her ideologies and values. A practice based approach to *reading* would occur concurrently with content-, process-, or structure-based reading, and provides an important counter to the caveats to each described above—In essence, then, this process-based reading might provide a third space through which to balance the tension described earlier. In practice-based reading, readers think carefully about

the elements of sponsorship associated with their reading. Where do they read? How do they do it? What captures and does not capture her or his attention? What structures, genres, and/or ideas are privileged here, and why are they privileged? How have the reader's experiences contributed to her or his interaction with these practices? How are these interactions with, and genres of, reading received by outside audiences, and why? This kind of reflexive reading can help readers begin to articulate their own reading processes, become attuned to areas where successful reading practices can be emulated and less successful ones improved, and consider the consequences of engaging in various genres of reading in various contexts. Practice-based reading will also help readers navigate between what Sheridan Blau has identified as two "common and closely related misperceptions" about reading: "the widely held idea that there is only one authoritative and best interpretation for … texts" implied in the idea of irreducibility, and "the opposite belief, which many students and some respected scholars think to be the logical alternative to the first position … , that there is no single or authoritative interpretation for a literary text, … [that] any and all interpretations have equal authority" implied in relationality (60). As Blau argues, both are myths—the boundaries around "acceptable" and "unacceptable" interpretations involve a performance that integrates one's own interpretation and acknowledgement of the dominant interpretation, with a heavy dose of audience awareness thrown in.

Reclaiming Reading: Frames for Reading and Readers

Practice-based reading requires the reader to take an active role in analyzing both the context for her reading and the activity itself. In the process, practice-based reading also involves readers in reclaiming the act of reading and taking a step toward changing the conception of (student) readers as passive and disengaged. Practice-based reading makes clear that reading, like writing, is what Tom Newkirk has called a performance; like writing, it is shaped by and contributes to a particular kind of self-representation. The first-year course, Newkirk asserts, should be a site "big enough for a diversity" of these forms (107).

But when it comes to reading, as Blau and others have demonstrated, the range of *possible* and *acceptable* roles available for students are generally more circumscribed than the possibilities for writing outlined in Newkirk's work. Thus, it is important to disentangle the complicated layers of reading expectations, cultural definitions of reading, student practices of reading, and the pedagogical imperatives surrounding reading in the writing classroom in order to examine and cultivate kinds of reading that we *want*

students to perform. For some readers, the idea of asserting this much "control" over a role might seem shockingly teacher-directed—after all, don't we want students to develop their own strategies, cultivate their own roles? Yes, but as the lenses adapted from Hanks' work demonstrate, such relationally-informed performances have their limits. As with all of the reading approaches described above, this reading must take place within (and with full understanding of) conventions guiding the contexts in which they will interact as readers and writers. Just as "experienced writers understand that writing usually involves an element of role playing" (Clark), when readers develop strategies for inhabiting a variety of active roles, they are more comfortable moving among the various contexts for reading that they encounter.

Rethinking Reading

Articulating the kinds of reading that are enacted in classrooms and the roles that readers are expected to perform within them can open important conversations that enable instructors (and/or programs) to more productively approach reading. At the most basic level, it can help instructors develop their pedagogies for reading in first-year writing. For instance, if an instructor intends to use a reading to discuss possible research processes, it is important for that instructor to develop process-based reading questions, rather than content or genre/structure-based ones, to support that use of reading. Equally important, though, it can also open an ongoing discussion about what kinds of sponsorships classes and/or writing programs represent, what roles they ask students to play, and how those roles reflect (or reject) broader frames around writing and students.

Of course, this approach to thinking about reading is, to some extent, prescriptive—after all, we are outlining distinct ways of reading that impose constraints on the possible range of interpretations that students are permitted. But just as Richard Straub argued that all instructor comments, even "non-directive" ones are really directive (and that it was more honest to not hide behind "suggestions" when those suggestions were invocations) (244-46), we would argue that the same holds true for reading. Reading theorists from Stanley Fish to Sheridan Blau have demonstrated that readers never interpret texts outside of communities (Fish) or cultures (Blau), and that those communities and cultures have vested interests in putting some boundaries around the range of possible interpretations. As Blau has put it, "our practice [of interpretation] is, in fact, governed by established disciplinary procedures that provide standards for distinguishing between valid and invalid interpretive claims" (75).

Of course, the question of what the delineation of reading practices outlined here leaves out remains. For some readers—and for many instructors—reading, like writing, has a sense of mystery and magic. For some readers, something nearly unspeakable can happen during the reading process. The problem comes when instructors are unclear about what that sense of mystery and magic means, when they expect students to achieve it but are unable to identify its elements, when they forget that it comes as much from a synchronicity between a reader's values and her interpretation of a text as from the context where the reading is done. When instructors expect magic, they sometimes take for granted that reading is a complex interaction between reader, text, and context. Student readers, too, sometimes find that the very mysterious nature of what instructors "want" brings them to complete frustration. As Marguerite Helmers reminds us, teaching reading is teaching relationships between readers and texts and also teaching relationships between readers and the space where they encounter texts (23). Through acknowledging that there are, in fact, particular ways that readers approach texts, it might be possible to make these spaces less mysterious.

NOTES:

[1] There is considerably more literature concerning middle and secondary-level reading instruction pedagogy; many theorists (classroom-based teacher-researchers and otherwise) offer a wide variety of specific, useful reading strategies to engage students in comprehension, making inferences, constructing meaning from texts, connecting with literature and non-fiction texts, and so on (see Zirinsky and Rau; Beers; Wilhelm, Baker, and Dube; Burke). Secondary instructors can speak more clearly about the strategies upon which they draw; for instance, some local districts use texts like Keene and Zimmerman's *Mosaic of Thought* to make explicit what is so often hidden about reading instruction.

[2] Hanks' conceptualizations of language also can be placed alongside ideas about the relationships between readers and texts. Irreducibility, for instance, is paralleled by the idea of a self-defined text, where the reader's job is to understand the text in relation to itself. This relationship is encompassed in approaches where the meaning of the text is believed to be contained in the text, as in new criticism, but it also is reflected in structural or might "spatial" readings where the reader focuses only on "the compositional structure or the architectonics of a work" (Calinescu 27), as in early structuralist approaches literary analysis like those in the work of Roman Jakobsen. Relationality is analogous to theories that presume that the reader's interpretation of text is constructed through filters that reflect her "personal circumstances" (ideologies, values, beliefs) at the time of her reading, but which cannot be extended to another time or reader (Hanks 21), as in reader response approaches where readers' interpretations are believed to be filtered through their individual experiences (e.g., Bleich, Fish). The language that is

used to express these interpretations, naturally, is also shaped by and contributes to shaping them. Such a reading is "temporal" – that is, it exists in a specific place in time and cannot be extended beyond that space (Calinescu, 21). Practically, finally, finds parallels in theories where texts are presumed to have stable meanings, but where the meanings are filtered by readers through lenses developed by her "broader values, beliefs, and (sometimes) self-legitimating attitudes" (Hanks 230). More recent theories of reading and interpretation, like those of Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier and others studying the history of reading and reception, would fall nearer the "practice" end on both spectrums as they take into account both the circumstances in which reading occurred, and the generic conventions of the texts being read in their considerations of how reading was interpreted (see, for example, Cavallo and Chartier, 1-11). Theories of language and reader-text relationships fall at various points on this diagram, of course, depending on the degree to which they consider language a contained system, a socially structured artifact, or a combination of the two that is influenced by context and ideology; and the ways that they position the construction of 'meaning' in a text: as something readers discover within the text, as something constructed by readers through their own experiences, or as something that is formed through a combination of both and filtered through context and ideology.

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