

Elephants, Pornography and Safe Sex: Understanding and Addressing Students' Reading Problems Across the Curriculum

Alice S. Horning, Oakland University

In any number of conference and consulting presentations I've done around the country in the last few years, I have often started by asking what reading has to do with elephants, porn and safe sex. This question often gets a laugh and definitely gets the attention of my audience, even if they don't have ready answers. Alternatively, I sometimes begin by asking what is the single most pressing problem college teachers face in the classroom today. And even when I am not the "hired hand" brought in to talk about reading, the following conversation doesn't go more than five minutes before reading comes up. When I report this kind of conversation to other audiences, inevitably many of my listeners nod in recognition. Students' reading status is a huge, elephantine problem for a number of reasons. Despite the amount of time they are spending online, they don't read extended non-fiction prose and they won't read unless required to do so by teachers or others. Their reading, such as it is, has become increasingly fragmented and shallow in ways explored in detail by Nicholas Carr in his recent book, *The Shallows* (2011). Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, they really can't read in the ways needed for academic and career success, as documented amply by a number of quantitative and qualitative studies (ACT, 2006; Pew, 2006; Jolliffe & Harl, 2008). Because I have been writing and speaking about this problem for the last few years, Michael Pemberton invited me to guest edit this issue of ATD on Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum. What the new research presented here and elsewhere makes clear is that this problem is both a problem of students and a problem of instructors; both groups need a clearly defined goal and expectations for every class in every semester (similar to advice on safe sex).

Students' problems with reading are ones I sometimes refer to as the "don't, won't, can't" problems. On any college campus now, a walk around reveals one aspect of the problem clearly. The students are all walking around with a little screen in their hands, and they are reading, and sometimes writing, on that screen. They bump into people, lose their way, and occasionally fall because of their absorption in their little boxes. So, how can we say they are not reading? We can say they are not reading because the reading they are doing, of Facebook status updates and tweets and such are tiny snippets of text. The reading they need to do for classes and later, in their professional lives, is going to require that they read and process extended texts much longer than status updates. Moreover, they will need to be able to analyze the content of the texts they read, put them together with other texts, whether on paper or online, evaluate them and make use of them in either their own writing or in other practical ways. So, they don't read in this sense. What they are lacking can be captured by this definition of academic critical literacy:

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Academic critical literacy is best defined as the psycholinguistic processes of getting meaning from or putting meaning into print and/or sound, images, and movement, on a page or screen, used for the purposes of analysis, synthesis, evaluation and application; these processes develop through formal schooling and beyond it, at home and at work, in childhood and across the lifespan and are essential to human functioning in a democratic society. (Horning, 2012, p. 14)

This definition creates a clearly defined goal every instructor should be trying to achieve in every class in every discipline. Academic critical literacy, then, is not like pornography, famously undefined by US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart (who said "I know it when I see it") (1964). This definition makes clear what and how students can and should read.

But they won't read unless required, and often, not even then. Ever give an assignment for students to read something more than a few pages and then try to have a discussion about it in class without threatening a quiz, or requiring a detailed response posting in your course management system, or otherwise coercing what teaching excellence scholar Linda Nilson (2010) calls "reading compliance?" The chances of successful discussion without coercion are rather slim. Unless the stakes are really high, it is very difficult to get students to read extended pieces without coercion. Nilson recommends making reading and response worth a minimum of 20% of a course grade, but even then, it's hard to get the kind of thorough, careful reading we really expect.

To some extent, this outcome results from the fact that students really can't read in the ways we expect. Studies by ACT (2006), by the Pew Charitable Trusts (2006), by leading reading scholars like David Jolliffe (2008) and by librarians (Project SAILS, 2000) that are both quantitative and qualitative make the "can't" part of the problem quite clear. And they make clear that many students not only come to college ill-prepared to do the kind of work we require (as indicated by the ACT findings among others), but also that we don't help them develop better skills on paper or online (as indicated by the Project SAILS measures of students' information literacy abilities during college and by the Pew study of students at graduation). So, don't, won't, can't. The reports in this issue of *ATD* will make clear that the problem belongs to both students and faculty. Indeed, it is as much or more a problem for faculty than it is for students. The goal here is not to assign blame, but to understand the problem and to provide specific and effective solutions. This Introduction will review both the students' don't, won't, can't situation, and the faculty's challenge to provide appropriate instruction and requirements in reading in all courses, whether they include writing assignments or not. Then, with a clear and specific definition of academic critical literacy, I will offer an overview of the new findings presented in the articles in this issue. Better reading and writing can help us help more students "cross the finish line" (Bowen et al., 2009), provide more satisfying teaching and learning in college classrooms, and prepare the critical literate population essential to a functioning democratic society.

It's About Students

The reading problem belongs first of all to the students we face every term. I have written elsewhere and at some length about students' difficulties with reading in this journal and elsewhere (2007, 2011, 2012), so I will just review these problems briefly here. The ACT's large-scale study of students' performance on the Reading portion of the ACT (2006) and David Jolliffe and Allison Harl's qualitative study of student reading at the University of Arkansas (2008) are two landmark exemplars of the many studies that illustrate students' reading problems. In the ACT study, the test-making organization followed 563,000 students who took the ACT for three years to examine the relationship between students' scores on the Reading section and their "success" in college. They determined that a score of 21 (on a scale of 0-36) was essential to "success." ACT defined success as

student' earning a GPA of 2.0 and returning for a second year of study. Only 51% of students in that large cohort achieved a score of 21 and were successful by ACT's definition. A higher standard of "success" would involve a much larger group, likely to include those we all face every Monday.

There are any number of reasons to feel skeptical about the ACT findings. It's a multiple-choice, timed test on paper. It requires students to read four short passages and answer ten questions on each one. They have thirty-five minutes to complete the test, and it is part of a 3.5 hour battery of tests. It does not involve any online work, and it does not involve following an extended argument, comparing two different points of views on the same issue, or any kind of evaluation of texts. On the other hand, ACT claims that it examines the RSVP (relationships, richness, structure, style, vocabulary and purpose) (ACT, 2006, p. 17) skills essential to academic reading. Set beside the fact that half of those who start any form of postsecondary education in the US never finish, according to the US Department of Education (Bowen et al., 2009), it seems likely that the ACT is measuring something important to college success. And half or more of students don't have the reading skills they need for that success.

If a qualitative study provides stronger evidence, then a look at a careful one done by reading scholar David Jolliffe and his colleague Allison Harl (2008) might be more persuasive. Jolliffe and Harl paid about 20 students at the University of Arkansas to complete a reading questionnaire, keep a log of their reading activities for two weeks, and write about one thing they read each day, following a set of guide questions the researchers provided. Their conclusions from a close analysis of the resulting data reveal students' poor critical reading skills and the need for faculty to work on reading in several specific ways. Jolliffe and Harl point to the need to help students analyze and synthesize what they read, connecting information among texts and between texts and their knowledge of the world beyond their reading whether through instruction or experience. And they note the need to do much more with technology (2008, p. 614). These studies are only two exemplars of a much larger body of data, both quantitative and qualitative, and both with traditional printed texts and online material, that reveal students' reading difficulties (Pew, 2006; Katz, 2007a, 2007b; Project SAILS, 2000). It is the elephant in the room, a problem too big to ignore.

It's About Faculty

In many ways and again for various reasons, faculty are complicit in students' reading problems. The goal here is not to assign blame, as I've said, but simply to make clear where we are and where we need to go. Faculty can and should be helping students be better readers in every course, whether it entails extensive reading or not. Even in math, if students can't read a fact situation and know which statistical tests and formulas apply, or if they can't solve an ordinary story problem, those are reading problems, as well as math problems. We won't help students build skills in critical literacy if we don't assign the work they need to do, help them develop the skills to do it, and insure that they actually do the work.

One discussion of our complicity appears in the work of teaching excellence scholar Linda Nilson. She is the director of the Office of Teaching Effectiveness and Innovation at Clemson University; her book, *Teaching at Its Best* (2010) has been published in a third edition, clearly a successful book. She devotes a full chapter to reading, with specific and common sense suggestions. She points out, in particular, that if faculty "lecture the readings" or provide summaries online of materials the students are supposed to read for themselves, they are not helping students develop the necessary skills in critical reading and thinking essential to success in their courses. She advocates making reading outcomes in some tangible form worth 20% of students' course grades because, according to her research, that's the level where students will become "reading compliant." That is, there is enough of an impact on course grades to get students to do the work. A strategy not mentioned by Nilson, but

offered by Peter Doolittle, an educational psychologist and also director of a teaching excellence center at Virginia Tech is 25-word summaries (Doolittle & Sherman, 2013). Any and all of these approaches will get faculty to stop doing students' reading for them and end the complicity with those "don't, won't, can't" students.

Further evidence of faculty complicity in the unwillingness to address students' reading problems appears in the AP English Language and Composition exam (College Board, 2012). The English Language course entails a perfectly good, challenging curriculum of reading and writing, to prepare students for the AP exam in this subject area. The exam, which I have scored over the past dozen years or so, is the place where the College Board supports the reading problem. A few years ago, in response to teacher complaints at both the high school and college levels, AP changed the free response (i.e., essay-writing) portion of the exam to include a synthesis question. For this question, students are given about half a dozen sources to read, each of which is no longer than one page. Then they are asked to use three of these sources in an essay in response to a prompt. In the scoring, AP readers are told that mentioning the requisite sources moves the essay to a higher than average score, and any response that has more content, like a summary moves it higher still. Critical thinking is not required or expected.

Finally, a recent report on college readiness makes clear how faculty in community colleges are complicit in students' reading problems. The National Center on Education and Economy released a report in May of 2013 called *What Does It Really Mean to Be College and Work Ready? The English Literacy Required of First Year Community College Students* (2013). Since more than half of all first-year writing courses are taught in community colleges (Higher Education cited by Taylor, 2009), and since first-year writing is one of the best places to begin helping students develop their reading skills, this report provides a significant look at what goes on in those courses. More than any other source mentioned here, this report shows that faculty do not demand, expect, require, or support the development of students' reading skills in the ways that they might.

The NCEE assembled a panel of educators and assessment scholars to look at three aspects of beginning English classes and introductory courses in an array of subject areas (that is, classes across the curriculum). They analyzed the texts used in these courses, the reading tasks given to students and the graded written work students produced. The findings show that the texts students are given are mostly at a high school level, but despite this fact, students have difficulty reading and writing about them because their skills are weak and because they are not asked to access and retrieve, integrate and interpret or reflect on and evaluate the material they read (NCEE, 2013, p. 16). Thus, the assignments do not develop students' reading or require them to apply higher order critical thinking skills to what they are asked to read. And what they are asked to read is not at a level sufficiently challenging to help students develop those skills. Faculty complicity does not help students develop the skills they really need.

What to Do?

In as many venues as I have been able to access, I have been saying for a long time that we need to do something about the reading problem among students. The need grows stronger as we all spend more time online, reading more widely but more shallowly as Carr (2011) has pointed out. College and university faculty need to understand that this issue belongs to all of us; it is not a problem that can be solved by English teachers alone. It is really and truly a problem across the curriculum, so it must be addressed across the curriculum. Just as young people are taught to practice safe sex every time, reading needs to be taught in every class, in every term, every time. The reading problem is as big as an elephant, so partial solutions are not going to work. The most effective solution will require

work on the part of both students and faculty, in all courses. The articles in this issue present useful findings and approaches that address the problem from both the student side and the faculty side.

The first three articles in this issue take up the reading problem from the student side and show how students can work to improve their reading in the context of a variety of courses. Leora Freedman's work in an East Asian studies department offers one example, showing that non-native speakers of English can improve their writing skills through small-group tutorial work focused on developing their reading abilities when working with assigned texts in their discipline. Like Freedman, Brian Gogan's application of the concept of thresholds, "Reading at the Threshold," also shows how work on reading in disciplinary courses, particularly if they are writing intensive, can serve students' need to develop their reading abilities. His study offers a look at the positive impact of reading on discipline-based learning as well as on students' writing. The third piece on the reading problem from the student side is Steven Pearlman's proposal to create "citizen experts" by improving students' reading. His interactive assessment project engages students in reading assigned course texts and then using that material in their own papers and in evaluating the reading of other students in their papers. The results here show that improving students' reading in every class has far-reaching effects in the achievement of course goals and in increasing students' critical literacy.

The remaining five articles in this issue address the faculty side of the reading problem. We know from the new NCEE study (2013) that there is much more for faculty to do in every class. Although that study looked specifically at community colleges, faculty at four-year institutions are equally complicit in their failure to require and support more and better student reading. The responsibilities of faculty are revealed clearly in the work on researched writing in every discipline, discussed by Jamieson, Odom and Rhodes. Jamieson presents the latest in a series of reports emerging from the large-scale study of student writing called The Citation Project (<http://site.citationproject.net/>). In "Reading and Engaging Sources," Jamieson draws on the large and growing body of data from her national study with colleagues on student source use in research papers. Students' poor use of sources reveals their reading problem and makes clear their need for help from every instructor with reading source materials so they can integrate them fully and effectively in their own papers. Odom's "Not Just for Writing Anymore" backs up Jamieson's discussion, showing that WAC principles should be applied to reading as well as to writing. Assignments that lead students to engage more deeply with the course readings and integrate them in discussion board postings, blogs and in-class group work produce more reading compliance and more academic critical literacy. Rhodes' "When is Writing Also Reading?" provides a third voice in this chorus. Her report shows that faculty can help students develop abilities with complex texts through the teaching of analysis, synthesis, evaluation and application.

The final two articles shift the focus on faculty responsibility in a somewhat different direction. Marty Townsend's work with student athletes offers a surprising look inside the reading lives of college football players. Recent reports on high profile football programs have created a negative view of college sports, but Townsend's thorough study of the "MU 26," a cohort of football players at a large Midwestern state university, shatters the stereotypes that result from the news reports. Not only did all of the students graduate within their playing eligibility time frame, but the data from their ACT scores, their responses to interview questions and their discussions of what and how they read show that much of the negative judgment of student athletes', at least with respect to their reading abilities, warrants rethinking. Finally, Justin Young and Charlie Potter explored the site of much academic literacy instruction, first-year writing courses at a regional, comprehensive state university. They sound a hopeful note by looking at survey data from students and faculty in combination with the Common Core State Standards now being implemented in K-12 schools across the country. In "The Problem of Academic Discourse," they argue that there is good reason to think that students will be

doing more work on reading both literary and informational texts prior to postsecondary enrollment, so they will arrive better prepared to engage in efficient and effective reading in every course.

This potentially positive future does not excuse either students or faculty from the need to work on the elephantine reading problem. Everyone needs to read better and faster; the flow of information coming at us on screens large and small is only growing, requiring stronger reading skills for every student in every course and for every citizen, whether working in academia or elsewhere. Students have the responsibility to do the work that will lead them to academic critical literacy as I've defined it. Faculty in every discipline must provide the instruction to get them there, showing them how to analyze, synthesize, evaluate and apply ideas and information from reading, whether from pages or screens. To see how to do so in every course and every semester, I invite you to read the reports presented here.

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Contact Information

Alice S. Horning
Department of Writing & Rhetoric
378 O'Doud Hall
Oakland University
Rochester, MI 48309
Toronto, ON 40506
Email: horning@oakland.edu
Phone: (248) 370-4134

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