

Multiliteracies and Meaning-Making: Writing to Read Across the Curriculum

Mary Lou Odom

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY

Faculty dissatisfaction with the ways students read and write in college is widespread, yet faculty development initiatives typically focus almost exclusively on writing. This chapter treats reading, like writing, as a complex, transformational process of meaning-making and thus looks to writing-based initiatives such as writing across the curriculum to inform approaches for improving college reading. Just as faculty involved with WAC re-examine why and how they ask students to write, faculty concerned with reading should consider the complexities created when students accustomed to an increasingly multiliterate textual environment enter college and are asked to read unfamiliar genres and formats in unfamiliar ways. Based on data from the first six years of a study of WAC faculty at a large, comprehensive state university, the chapter suggests three foundational principles essential for supporting student reading in this context. First, faculty must recognize ways in which they impact student reading behavior – beyond assigning texts or writing related to texts. Second, faculty must articulate to students their goals for student reading. Third, faculty must be willing to provide guidance for students reading complex, discipline-specific texts that may look quite different from much of the reading that has occupied their textual lives until this point.

In many ways, higher education perpetuates a curious dichotomy between reading and writing. Young children are taught both skills together, learning to form letters as they also learn to identify them. As students progress in school, however, the discourse surrounding literacy education changes: barring signs or diagnoses of serious reading difficulties, students can expect little reading instruction once they have mastered the skills taught in elementary school. Even the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010), claiming to promote “wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens worldviews,” devote explicit attention to teaching reading only through fifth grade. Beyond that, the Standards focus largely on the actual texts themselves, laying a foundation in schools for what Thomas Newkirk (2013) has referred to as “a sterile view of reading” (p. 2).

But academic literacy, though shaped by both the production and consumption of texts, is far from sterile and far from an isolated process easily confined to

one stage of learning or school. As Chris Anson has noted earlier in this volume, however, reading tends to be seen as an “independent” precursor to the work, including writing, that students do – even when that work directly pertains to or relies upon their reading. One reason for this frustrating contradiction was suggested by Robert Scholes (2002) in an opinion essay for *Pedagogy*:

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. (p. 166)

Seeing both writing and reading—and determining how to use what we know pedagogically about the former to advance our approach to the latter—is the goal of this chapter.

This goal is a complicated and at times uncomfortable one because it requires recognizing that, despite the fact that writing can indeed be a tool to promote learning and reading (Langer & Applebee, 1987; Smith, 1988; Graham & Hebert, 2010), it does not do so automatically. In fact, a successful pedagogy that uses writing to enhance reading requires considerable effort on the part of educators to recognize the reality, as literacy scholar Deborah Brandt (1994) explained, that “What motivates and brings meaning to acts of reading or writing may not always be texts” (p. 460). Determining what does bring meaning to our students’ textual experiences is a crucial first step in developing pedagogies that make successful reading, writing, and learning connections for students.

Reading in a Time of Textual Change

Success in higher education today rests, as it always has, largely on expectations of literacy. One key component of those expectations holds that irrespective of discipline students will learn, to borrow from M.H. Abrams, by “doing things with texts.” Few and far between are those college classes that do not incorporate and depend on reading, yet as we know from Jolliffe and Harl (2008) attention to “careful reading” has “become a smaller blip on the higher educational radar screen” (p. 600). Such inattention is especially problematic in light of the intricate processes and complex materials that increasingly characterize college reading practices today.

Ironically, unlike the silence that typically accompanies consideration of these intricate reading processes, the nature of what constitutes “text” has become a subject of vigorous debate. This contrast represents a missed opportunity to attend to concerns about reading, for as Charles Kinzer (2010) has noted, “The definition

of literacy is tied more closely than ever to the specific medium in which literacy practices occur” (p. 53). Given the seismic shifts in the variety, availability, and nature of texts seen in recent decades, this inextricable link between reading and texts should demand some recalibration of faculty expectations for student reading. Indeed, today’s students enter college with reading behaviors appropriate for texts that are less linear and permanent, more dynamic and multimodal, and that require greater agency on students’ parts than much of what they likely encounter in their classes. By focusing its attention on the mediums but not the processes of reading, however, higher education has continued to operate with an alarmingly incomplete understanding of these literacy practices.

At least since the New London Group’s 1996 manifesto on “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies,” there has been a degree of recognition that non-school-based literacy practices offer potential avenues for engaging and empowering students as readers. Julie Coiro (2003) characterized online reading as a process requiring students not only to develop new reading strategies but also to expand their approaches to traditional “text elements, reader elements, activities, and sociocultural contexts” (p. 463). Kinzer (2003, 2010) and others have recorded numerous ways in which making meaning from digital and multimodal texts involves students in the simultaneous processes of decoding alphabetic and visual material, assessing and prioritizing competing information, and determining if and how additional knowledge needs to be obtained.

In their article revisiting the New London Group publication, Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis (2009) considered the implications of these new and complex meaning-making processes and explained why it is imperative for teachers to comprehend how their students experience text: “Old logics of literacy and teaching are profoundly challenged by this new media environment. They are bound to fall short . . . disappointing young people whose expectations of engagement [with text] are greater” (p. 173). We may grimace at the English major reading *Moby Dick* on her smartphone, but we also must be open to the idea that such substantive changes in the nature of texts may have provided her with some of the very behaviors we desire – and yet identify as absent – in how she and her peers read in college.

Many faculty already acknowledge this evolving literacy landscape in the writing they assign in their classes: consider the composing students do on class discussion boards, wikis, or blogs and the projects they complete in multimodal or digital formats. Thus, as college writing has changed, so too can college reading. To that end, this chapter operates on a definition of college reading as, at its best, a complex, transformational process of meaning-making influenced in often subtle or even invisible ways by the social, disciplinary, and technological forces that shape today’s texts and today’s students’ lives. By looking at successful efforts to understand and teach student writing with these influences in mind, we can gain insight into college reading both as it is and as it could be.

Reading in a Writing Across the Curriculum Program

As we seek to understand and improve student reading, examining the ways faculty perceive – or more accurately what they *mean* when they refer to – “student reading” is critical. Faculty expectations for reading in college are highly nuanced, demanding critical literacy skills often inaccessible for students who, as Horning (2007) has described them, have little “experience working with extended texts and the world of ideas from which they arise.” Much as the Common Core’s relegation of reading to the category of “Foundational Skills” may limit its overt instruction beyond elementary school, faculty who overlook college reading’s complexity may unwittingly restrict the knowledge and skills about reading they might profitably share with their students.

When students lack both experience and instruction in the kinds of reading necessary for their success in school, they unsurprisingly fall back on strategies used for the reading they do know how to do – the kind of reading and interacting with non-school texts that is not, on its own, typically adequate for college. As a result, many students become less likely to read for school at all, and their reading behaviors that so frustrate educators become a self-perpetuating cycle that is all the more difficult to break when it, like reading, operates virtually unseen.

The mismatch between faculty expectations for and student performance on reading-related tasks has been well documented throughout this collection and elsewhere, but two key points warrant special emphasis here: first, faculty dissatisfaction with student reading is profound; and two, such dissatisfaction is widespread throughout all majors and subject areas. This extreme, cross-disciplinary outcry over student reading ability echoes concerns often voiced about student writing. But whereas few pedagogical movements have emerged to address reading at the college level, writing across the curriculum (WAC), as Susan McLeod and Eric Miraglia (2001) explained, has exerted considerable influence on how college faculty teach:

WAC, more than any other recent educational reform movement, has aimed at transforming pedagogy at the college level, at moving away from the lecture mode of teaching (the “delivery of information” model) to a model of active student engagement with the materials and with the genres of the discipline through writing. (p. 5)

The early WAC movement provides promising context for considering how to engage faculty in improving student reading. In addressing “How Well Does Writing Across the Curriculum Work?” Toby Fulwiler (1984) explained that “to improve student writing we had to influence the entire academic community in which writing takes place, to make the faculty sensitive to the role of writing in

learning as well as to the relationship of writing to other communication skills—reading, speaking, and listening” (p. 113). This encompassing view of WAC not only confirms how well suited it is to address college reading, but it also reminds us again of the multi-faceted and interconnected nature of literacy, including reading, throughout higher education.

McLeod and Miraglia have suggested that one source of WAC’s success and longevity is this attention to “writing as an essential component of critical thinking and problem solving, key elements in a liberal education” (p. 3). Because much of what faculty want from good student reading mirrors their goals for good student writing—engagement, critical thinking, depth of understanding—writing across the curriculum provides a valuable lens through which to examine the ways faculty can influence how their students read. Additionally, WAC programs can serve as sites in which faculty perceptions of and approaches to student reading can be probed more deeply.

This article draws on data from the first six years of an ongoing study of WAC faculty at a large, comprehensive state university. The university’s institutional review board determined that this study qualified for exempt status under DHHS (OHRP) Title 45 CFR Part 46.101(b)(4). WAC faculty come from the university’s largest college, the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, which, as of this writing, is the only college to support a WAC program. After self-selecting to participate in a daylong workshop on WAC with a nationally recognized WAC scholar, up to ten faculty members are supported in the following semester as they redesign and teach a course to include the implementation of WAC principles. At the conclusion of this semester, they submit reflective reports on their experiences along with survey data from students in their WAC-focused courses. Each semester’s group of faculty tailors survey questions based on their particular approaches and interests, but six core questions are asked each semester. Of these six, one directly addresses reading.

Initially, reading had not been a focus of either the WAC program or this study, both of which sought primarily to assess WAC’s efficacy for enhancing student learning and engagement with course material and for impacting teaching as it pertained to those goals. However, faculty concern about student reading became such a consistent refrain in both monthly WAC faculty meetings and in their reflective narratives that reexamining faculty and student data for insight into student reading within the context of the program was essential.

Analysis of student data compiled throughout the study indicates that students overwhelmingly found writing facilitated their reading of course material. Of the 869 students surveyed, 85.6% agreed or strongly agreed that the writing assigned by their professor “helped me understand the reading assignments.” Only 6% of all students surveyed expressed any level of disagreement with this statement. However, feedback from faculty on WAC’s ability to impact student reading was far less

decisive, and narrative analysis and coding of the faculty's reflective narratives ultimately revealed stark differences between the WAC strategies of those faculty who perceived improvement in student reading and those who did not.

Typical of many faculty throughout higher education, participants in this WAC program expressed a variety of concerns about student reading. Uniformly frustrated at students who simply did not read assigned material, WAC faculty also articulated specific complaints about the reading their students did attempt. A psychology professor lamented her students' lack of "in-depth" reading; a political scientist reported students "struggle" to carry out any "critical assessment" pertaining to course readings or research, and a history professor noted that students often give complex historical documents little more than "a cursory glance." Difficulties with student reading extended beyond homework readings or professional texts as well. One anthropologist noted that many students struggled with peer review because they lacked "the ability to read a paper critically." No discipline was immune to problems with student reading; several English faculty described their upper-level students as unable to engage in "critical reflection" and simply "unprepared to discuss the literature" they had read.

What Doesn't Work

Despite the considerable success most WAC faculty reported in rethinking how and what they asked students to write, some remained deeply disappointed in their students' reading. The reflective narratives of these faculty suggest that their difficulty in effecting positive change in this area can be traced to two key assumptions about the relationship between writing and reading. Both of these assumptions, furthermore, seem deeply rooted in an uncomplicated and ultimately problematic view of reading itself. First, these faculty members assumed that requiring students to write about their reading would ensure that they read more and that they read more actively and carefully. Second, these individuals assumed that this writing would automatically show that students were engaged with text in critical and meaningful ways. Unfortunately, as these faculty members discovered, the requirement to write on its own does not necessarily provide sufficient motivation or instruction for students to read in the ways faculty may desire.

A faculty member teaching an upper-level psychology class endeavored to use online discussion postings to encourage students to engage more critically with textbook material that she would eventually put on their exams. The professor had selected these particular topics from material that had proven the most difficult for students in previous semesters, and, while she used the word "prompts" throughout the semester, the discussion board material she posted asked students for responses to very specific questions (for example, "How do brain imaging studies provide

evidence for distribution of activity?”). In her end-of-semester narrative, the professor reported that while “students’ discussion posts were generally thorough, they did not necessarily address in detail the evidence underlying our existing knowledge of selected discussion topics.”

Student survey comments in this course indicated little interest in the readings and presented a picture of student engagement with course texts in line with the findings of Jolliffe and Harl: “Students were reading, but they were not reading studiously, either in terms of the texts they were engaging with or the manner in which they read them” (p. 611). This professor had imagined her discussion format to be a task like those Art Young (2006) has challenged teachers to devise—tasks for which “students need to be actively involved in thinking and solving problems, in developing knowledge and applications” (p. 47). Yet her students simply saw places to deposit information they could find easily by scanning their textbooks—a far cry from the kind of transformative work with text we hope college reading can be.

Of those WAC strategies that proved unsuccessful, the most common by far involved the use of writing to compel students to read. The following excerpt from the narrative of a political science professor is representative of a number of faculty who used this approach. Her account demonstrates how faculty assumptions about student reading can lead to missteps in how they incorporate reading into their courses:

Students completed many in-class writing activities. On occasion, students would be asked to write about the reading for the day; such writings served as a sort of “reading quiz” and were intended to encourage students to come to class prepared. I found that these assignments were the least successful [among her WAC efforts]. Students usually did poorly on these assignments, particularly if they covered the reading from the textbook, and I found myself discouraged from using them.

Even well-intentioned teachers like this one can create a disconnect between what they want students to do with texts and what they ask students to do with texts. The professor wanted students to read thoroughly, and she believed that thoroughness would appear in their writing in ways not easily discerned on a quiz. However, without further guidance from the professor as to what that kind of reading looked like (particularly it seems when reading from their textbooks), students responded with reading and writing behaviors just like those they were accustomed to using for quizzes. Much like the students of the psychology professor who retitled reading questions as “prompts,” these students responded to tasks based on their nature and not their name.

Why the quiz/coercion approach so reliably failed speaks to the nature of what both faculty and their students expect of reading done in college. Although some

research into how quizzes might encourage student reading compliance has shown a positive correlation (Sappington, Kinsey, & Munsayac, 2002; Berry, Hill, & Stevens, 2011), Linda Nilson (2010) has argued persuasively that when students lack a “perceived need” or a “perceived payoff” their motivation to read is significantly reduced (p. 212–213). Indeed, nowhere in her extensive discussions of teaching strategies to improve student reading has Nilson cited research that test or quiz-like exercises prove useful for this goal.

But perhaps the most compelling evidence that improving student reading depends on understanding something of students’ perceptions of reading comes from the students themselves. Such was the case for one WAC faculty member in public administration who began each meeting of her graduate course by having students freewrite in response to questions posed regarding their homework reading. Although this individual began the semester believing her course’s heavy reading load made it ideally suited for the use of WAC strategies, she was continually disappointed that the freewriting she received indicated little engagement with course texts: “Only a handful of students provided insightful and reflective thoughts . . . strategies on how to get students to read remain a challenge for me.”

Eventually, this faculty member sought feedback from the class on her use of these new writing assignments, and she was both shocked and enlightened to see how differently she and her students perceived the reading-based writing she had asked them to do:

I realized, based on the comments received, that students thought that the writing assignment was a quiz, and that made them nervous. I realized that I had not made it clear at the beginning of the semester of the purpose of the writing assignment; I had mentioned to the students that the assignment would not be graded, but somehow the students took it as a weekly quiz.

The professor noted that in the future she would articulate earlier and more clearly for students how she perceived assigned reading and writing to function in the course. She explained that in assigning freewriting to enhance student reading of course texts, she would immediately point out to students “The purpose of the writing . . . how it will help students engage with the material and how it will strengthen students’ understanding of the material.”

This teacher’s resolve to make her reading goals clear for her students is one strategy Horning (2007) has also espoused. In discussing goals inherent in the complex types of reading students need to do in college and beyond, she noted, “It is also difficult for students to read well enough to achieve these goals if they are not stated explicitly, taught directly, and required in students’ work” (Defining Reading section, para. 3). Helping students see writing as a tool designed to help them understand and make meaning from what they read is an idea many students

would no doubt find revelatory—particularly when their previous experiences with writing about reading seemed designed primarily to test reading compliance. Furthermore, the notion that students should engage in an active process of meaning-making for all texts—not just those that they interact with in digital or visual realms—also needs to be made clear if students are to read less passively and with greater transformative purpose.

Tellingly, faculty who reported little or no productive change in student reading behaviors (or work dependent on student reading) were those individuals who did little to reconsider the role and purpose of the reading they assigned in their classes. They may have changed writing assignments, and they may have become more creative with delivery or prompts of reading-based writing, but they remained frustrated at student interaction with text because they did little to alter the nature of student interaction with text, particularly those texts that might have been less familiar and thus more difficult for students. Productive change in attitudes and approaches toward reading does not come easily, but change is possible, as a number of other WAC faculty and their strategies show.

What Works

Attend a writing across the curriculum workshop or meeting and you are likely to hear considerable discussion about designing effective writing assignments. An assignment's purpose, goals, and guidelines, even its length and tone or style, as well as the teacher's expectations are all issues faculty who participate in WAC programs learn to consider. Doing so helps to create writing assignments that students can complete successfully and that, in the words of Young (2006) "are embedded in the unique goals of each course and are integral to the building of knowledge in that course" (p. 5). Yet while invested faculty often write and rewrite essay assignments and assessment criteria, and while they often spend considerable class time reviewing these assignments with students, few college teachers could so readily recount a time they labored over instructions for assigning reading.

But for WAC faculty who made substantive changes in how they asked students to approach and engage with their reading, real improvement in student comprehension and engagement with text resulted. Furthermore, students who read in these more transformative ways were far more successful in using what they read to their advantage throughout the course. Understanding the success behind strategies that produced this sort of improvement begins with examining how these faculty members stated their goals.

Faculty who were willing to rethink not only writing but also reading in their courses tended to have goals for student reading that went beyond the simple evaluation of whether or not students had read what had been assigned for homework. For

example, in contrast to one English professor who assigned blogs “in place of quizzes, as a way of seeing who is keeping up with the reading,” another WAC faculty member from the same department set out to use blogging with very different goals in mind.

This professor implemented blogs into her general education literature course to address her concerns about how – not just if – her students had read in the past. In particular, she wanted her blog assignment to increase student preparation for and comfort with in-class discussions of the literature they read for homework. With these goals in mind, she set up an assignment that allowed students to interact with the course blog much as they would with a blog in a non-academic setting:

I wanted students to feel they could reflect on any part(s) of the reading that appealed to them most. In order to ensure this, I did not ask students to respond to a question or series of questions. Students were expected to reflect on the first reading of each text in a casual nature. The writing would be similar to writing that might be found in a journal. I did specify that students were not to summarize the reading but to work through their reactions to the text . . . I [also] had students post an introduction entry. In this entry, they were asked to not only introduce themselves to the class but also to talk about what they hoped to learn from the course and what works of literature they’ve enjoyed in the past.

What is notable about this professor’s approach to student reading is her lack of focus on reading completion. Rather, she emphasized engagement with text – even the texts students had read and enjoyed at other points in their lives.

A point value was assigned for each blog entry, but the value of this assignment went well beyond that for both students and teacher. At the conclusion of the course, the professor reflected positively on the role that the blogs had played in enhancing a number of the course’s learning outcomes: “The blogs facilitated better class discussions. Students were more prepared since they had already posted their initial reactions to the blog and were able to better articulate what they enjoyed or didn’t enjoy about the reading The blogs also made for a class that appeared to be more intimate.”

As Anson has also discussed in this collection, creative, lower-stakes writing activities such as this one can make reading more meaningful for students in any discipline. Indeed, students in the class acknowledged how much this approach supported their reading, with one student describing the blog entries as “wonderful avenues for expression and creativity on the material.”

In many ways, this assignment is a model for how to blend the informal writing-to-learn strategies of WAC with existing knowledge about current reading practices. While reading literary texts may not have been part of these students’

everyday literacy experiences, the use of a blog allowed them to draw on their more typical reading and writing behaviors such as writing or replying to public blog posts or stating an opinion in the online comments section of an article. Similarly, by sharing their personal reactions to readings in the blogs, students established a connection with the traditional and in many cases centuries-old texts they were reading. Much as expressivists have argued that students become more engaged with writing when they begin with a topic or idea that is familiar and personal, so too can students who connect on a personal level with a text engage more deeply in their reading. Notably, such connections did not mean students learned to privilege personal feeling at the expense of critical thought: the faculty member noted that the quality of the students' critical essays was higher than in any previous semester.

The fact that students are able to transfer initial personal engagement with text to more complex acts such as analysis or synthesis is key for faculty who want or need to assign more academic kinds of writing. A professor in the university's conflict management graduate program chose to use John Bean's well-known RAFT (Role-Audience-Format-Task) heuristic to revise a longstanding, highly structured assignment called "Memo to Self." While in the past, the professor had provided a list of elements from the course readings that students were to address in their memos, this new assignment asked students to compose a more clearly situated, rhetorical piece of writing to "revisit and critique a negotiation in which you were a primary party." Additionally, students were to provide "recommendations to yourself, specifically meant to improve your handling of any similar negotiation."

This professor explained that his goal in having the class apply their reading of course concepts to a real-life scenario was to "Push students to recognize and record those lessons on paper, and thus (hopefully) internalize them more deeply." It is after all this type of purposeful exercise Young (2006) encouraged when he made the following appeal: "One ongoing task, which I hope you will share with me, is to develop writing-to-communicate assignments and classroom practices that encourage sincere and authentic communication" (p. 49). The results of this authentic communication for the conflict management professor were truly positive. Not only did the writing he received demonstrate "students' application of abstract principles to concrete experiences," but he also was gratified by student responses on his end-of-semester evaluations: "The memo to self helped me learn how to apply the readings to real life situations."

In reality, this assignment was doubly authentic. First, the guiding task of the assignment—a Memo to Self—immediately encouraged the sort of connections between text and self that students experience in their reading outside of school. Second, when students returned to their course readings, it was not simply to gather a requisite number of sources to fulfill the assignment. Rather, this task required them to pay careful, focused attention as they read to be sure the material they included aligned with the goals of their memos.

Connecting the work of their courses to the “real world” is a thread that runs visibly through many of the most successful reading and writing across the curriculum intersections attempted by the WAC faculty in this program. A sociology professor who was “looking for a way to make social problems come alive” for her class decided to engage students in identifying readings appropriate for inclusion in the course. Using what she had learned from a WAC workshop about crafting assignments and making tasks seem genuine to students, she established clear guidelines for students to find, read, and analyze recent articles about contemporary social problems.

Not only was the professor thrilled with the quality of the texts students selected, but 96% of her students stated they found the assignment beneficial. For this teacher and others like her, blurring the lines between writing to learn and reading to learn by connecting to the world outside the classroom proved a successful approach even for reluctant or inexperienced college readers. Furthermore, by allowing students to go “outside” the course to find texts, this teacher implicitly recognized the value inherent in the reading her students did beyond school.

Like most teachers, the WAC faculty in this study found their experiences with student reading varied widely among different classes and even among different tasks and texts in the same class. What we can learn from these variations is how to apply what we now know about student reading through a range of approaches that can promote student learning. That is not to say that students do not need to learn material found in their textbooks, nor is it an argument that students do not need to learn how to read those textbooks in order to access that material. But using strategies that recognize the many other kinds of texts and ways of reading that exist in students’ lives can clearly be successful.

In a surprising turn of events, the political science professor so discouraged at the failure of her in-class writing “reading quizzes” decided to embark on another kind of in-class writing activity—but this time with great success. In marked contrast to her first WAC strategy, she asked students to respond to current event articles in the *The Economist* using any of the concepts from their course readings. Her description of that experience and her students’ resulting reading and writing differed markedly from her reflection in the previous section:

Students seemed much more likely to have completed the required current events readings and seemed to enjoy using these events to help explore the course concepts in greater detail. Students tended to do very well on these assignments, sometimes applying concepts in ways that I had not even considered. I think that these assignments were particularly successful because they were able to utilize something that students were more interested in (current events) and thus students were a bit more excited about doing them. From my perspective, they were quite

successful in that they really forced students to think about the course concepts and theories in an analytical way and helped them build the skills to use these concepts in their future international affairs courses and in their lives.

Rather than coercion, it is meaningful reading of this sort that will be key to solving the problems student face when reading in college.

Jolliffe and Harl (2008) have suggested faculty pursue more ways to establish these sorts of linkages for students, but the success of their charge that “faculty members need to teach students explicitly how to draw the kinds of connections that lead to engaged reading” requires an understanding of evolving literacy practices deep enough to establish these valuable “text-to-world and text-to-text connections” (p. 613). Just as many of the students and teachers in this study were able to do, the political science professor and her students took an important step in that direction. In having students connect course readings to actual events beyond the classroom, students also could begin to see that the reading they are asked to do in college is not wholly separate from their outside worlds.

Rethinking Reading in College

Student reading is a complexity at any level. Characterized by a transparency that renders it too easily and too often overlooked, explicit reading instruction tapers off precipitously after elementary school as students, teachers, and testing begin to focus on the texts being read rather than the strategies used to read them. It is no surprise, therefore, that faculty dissatisfaction with student reading in college is vocal and widespread. When looking for ways to address this challenge, WAC, already proven to be a transformative force for teachers, is a natural place to turn.

Just as writing across the curriculum encourages faculty to consider the ways they ask students to write, efforts at improving student reading must begin with a conscious awareness that we ask and expect students to read in particular and highly contextual ways that may not always be familiar to them. Pam Hollander, Maureen Shamgochian, Douglas Dawson, and Margaret Pray Bouchard have noted in this collection that as teachers we eventually must ask ourselves “What are we communicating to our students directly or indirectly about reading?” By no means do the experiences of the WAC faculty in this study represent the complete range of answers to this question. Likewise, their experiences do not encompass every strategy that might productively change the way we assign, teach, or assess reading in higher education. What we can draw from these examples, however, are key principles that will support and encourage student reading far more than faculty across disciplines tend to do now.

First and foremost, faculty must see that they have a role—beyond simply assigning texts or writing related to those texts—to play in student reading behavior. Second, in this role, faculty must be able not only to articulate their goals for student reading but also to make those goals clear to students. Third, faculty must be willing to provide guidance for students reading complex, discipline-specific texts that may look quite different from much of the reading that has occupied their textual lives up until this point.

Student consumption of many outside-of-school texts has much in common with the transformative, meaning-making work we hope for in college reading and learning. However, the fact that less traditional reading behaviors can prove advantageous for developing competent college readers is helpful only if students ultimately can transfer those skills to their college literacy tasks. Students who have not developed reading strategies appropriate for extracting and processing meaning from college texts will struggle to complete both reading and writing tasks.

The faculty and student experiences with reading in this study echo the growing body of research demonstrating that open, explicit work on how to read for and in college needs to be undertaken. Just as McLeod and Miraglia (2001) urged that “It is an error to see writing to learn and writing to communicate as somehow in conflict with each other,” it is an error to see reading and writing as entirely separate and thus not able to benefit from similar pedagogical approaches. Using strategies gained in their endeavors in this writing across the curriculum program, many faculty found ways to begin to make meaningful connections with reading possible for their students.

Russell (1990) has suggested that WAC encourages us to consider who plays what role in determining what and how we teach, and he has argued that “WAC ultimately asks: In what ways will graduates of our university use language and how shall we teach them to use it in those ways?” (p. 70). In essence, Russell’s question urges us to pursue a broader view of literacy throughout higher education, a goal already inherent in much WAC work. Steve Parks and Eli Goldblatt (2000) have extended this pursuit and called for a much more explicitly comprehensive approach and spirit within the WAC movement:

The argument is not that WAC needs to abandon its traditional support for writing in the disciplines, but that we should imagine our project as one that combines discipline-based instruction with a range of other literacy experiences that will help students and faculty see writing and reading in a wider social and intellectual context than the college curriculum. (pp. 585–586)

As is evidenced by the WAC faculty narratives examined here, reading is rarely far from the minds of teachers who want to encourage student learning. Making reading a more overt element of our pedagogies and better articulated in our

expectations to students can only serve to reduce teacher anxiety and frustration and improve students' performances with regard to reading.

College students today do read. And they read frequently and often with great enthusiasm. However, as Jolliffe and Harl found, rather than reading assigned school texts, students read for reasons such as “values clarification, personal enrichment, and career preparation” (p. 600). These reasons are laudable, and they are not absent in the texts we ask and need college students to comprehend. Too often, however, our students come to college in possession of inaccurate notions of what it means to read for school while at the same time clinging to inadequate reading strategies that do not enable them to correct those misconceptions and recognize that the elements they look for in texts can exist in less familiar venues and formats such as their course readings.

The ramifications of a system of higher education that does not resolve this disconnect and that thus does not produce individuals in possession of critical and evolving reading skills are sobering. Scholes (2002) argued that such reading, by its very nature, is challenging to achieve but indisputably essential: “The basis of an education for the citizens of a democracy lies in that apparently simple but actually difficult act of reading so as to grasp and evaluate the thoughts and feelings of that mysterious other person: the writer” (p. 171). Helping our students become better readers—in college and in the world that awaits them well beyond—will require the rethinking of existing approaches to literacy and pedagogy by educators in all disciplines.

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