

# Frustration and Hope: Examining Students' Emotional Responses to Reading

Maureen McBride and Meghan A. Sweeney

*ABSTRACT: Resurgence in college-level reading research has led to studies on rhetorical reading and reading transfer, but often absent from these discussions are student emotions about reading and themselves as readers. Our qualitative study explores these emotions by examining how basic writing students perceive ideal readers and reading difficulties. Our findings suggest students' emotional responses play an important role in how they interact with texts and how they view themselves as readers and learners. Specifically, our research suggests students experience a sense of disassociation with a readerly identity, but they still maintain a sense of hope for developing reading strategies and identifying as readers in the future. We argue for more scholarly examinations of the role of emotions in reading and basic writing research.*

*KEYWORDS: basic writing; critical reading; emotion; ideal reader; identity; reading in basic writing; rhetorical reading; student perceptions*

Scholars, administrators, and teachers often point to problems created by a perceived literacy crisis of students who can decode but not make sense of texts (Beers; Hock and Deshler; Hock et al.; Kieffer and Lesaux; Riddle and Rose). At all levels, educators have attempted to identify critical developmental moments for students and curricular changes that might alleviate the perceived crisis. Reflecting on the renewed interest in reading and its effect on literacy instruction, Mariolina Salvatori and Patricia Donahue speculated about the potential new directions reading scholarship might take us as teachers and scholars (“What is College English?”), noting

---

**Maureen McBride**, Director of the University Writing & Speaking Center at the University of Nevada, Reno, studies postsecondary academic literacies and peer-to-peer interactions. Her work has been published in *Assessing Writing*, *College Composition and Communication*, and *The Peer Review*.

**Meghan A. Sweeney**, Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and Composition at Saint Mary's College of California, studies postsecondary academic literacies. Her work has been published in *Research in the Teaching of English*, *Composition Studies*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, and *Journal of General Education*.

that reading studies within writing research had gone dormant for decades after the 1980s.

However, reading *has* become relevant again. Since the publication of Salvatori and Donahue's article in 2012, several studies have added new directions to the growing body of reading research. Many of these studies run parallel to, while also extending, reading research from the 1980s as scholars ask questions about how students should read and how they actually do read. For example, Ellen Carillo argues for reflective reading practices to help students be more mindful readers. Doug Downs calls for rhetorical reading as part of the writing-about-writing pedagogical framework. Michael Bunn supports a reading-like-writers stance to increase student motivation. Others have joined conversations about transfer, including Tara Lockhart and Mary Soliday, who report on successful transfer of reading concepts from an integrated reading and writing curriculum into their upper-division courses. In addition, Brian Gogan found that rhetorical genre awareness operates as a threshold concept in first-year composition. Finally, since many students taking reading courses in college are placed into basic reading and writing classes (whether integrated reading-writing or discrete reading courses), scholarship such as Cheryl Hogue Smith's research on students' deferent stances and Meghan Sweeney and Maureen McBride's study of difficulty papers are needed to address the issues of reading instruction for students labeled as under-prepared.

When we move reading from the periphery to the center, as Salvatori and Donahue recommend, we simultaneously find ourselves moving toward the direction of the basic reading and writing classroom to understand how students in these courses perceive reading and perceive themselves as readers, and how those perceptions complicate their interactions with texts. As basic writing instructors, we are particularly interested in those students who are placed in a literacy intervention, such as a basic reading and writing courses, since that placement has the potential to disrupt students' self perceptions as well as their perceptions of reading itself. Much of the current reading research focuses primarily on cognitive aspects. To add to our understanding of the intersections of reading instruction and student learning, scholars can examine how students' perceptions are influenced by their emotional responses to reading. As an example, David Jolliffe and Allison Harl's research, which includes some examination of students' perceptions, found that students had a negative perception of college reading primarily attributable to dull and unnecessary texts. We are left wondering how this perception of college reading is related to how students see themselves as

readers and if a better understanding students' emotional responses will help us as instructors of students in basic reading and writing classes.

To add to the growing body of literacy scholarship and explore our questions as basic writing instructors, we examine how students' emotional responses to reading offer insight into their perceptions of reading. Our goal with this research is to better understand students and their interactions with texts to find ways to more effectively engage them in reading tasks specifically and reading-writing tasks generally. We hope to better understand the complex relationships students have with reading and with being readers by looking at emotional responses. To this end, our qualitative research study examines emotions related to reading that students in basic reading and writing classes reveal through their reflections about reading and being readers to bring attention to the affective dimensions of learners.

### **The Importance of Emotion**

In higher education, indifference to emotions and emphasis of rationality have dominated formal education (Leathwood and Hey). Zambo and Brem suggest that "educators must realize that emotion and cognition act in parallel in subtle and powerful ways" (189).

If instructors can better understand the connections between students' emotions and performance, we can help guide students to gain more control over their learning. Specific to the college composition classroom, Christy Wenger claims that we need to move past our dismissal of how feelings impact learning and revalue students' emotions. Wenger says emotions should be part of our understanding and examinations of social theory and social transformations, which could include helping our students transition from previous educational experiences, such as high school or work environments, to expectations for college-level reading and writing. Wenger suggests that composition instructors have a responsibility to help students use their emotions to understand themselves and their world as they develop their stances as critical beings. Wenger also draws on the research of composition scholars Laura Micciche and Lynn Worsham to point to the shifts in scholarship that examine the impact of emotions. Wenger states, "If our rituals and practices of teaching writing do not account for the emotional experience of writing, learning and meaning-making, we do ourselves and our students a great disservice" (48). In her research, Wenger claims that focusing on students' emotions provides a way into texts for students who might otherwise struggle to engage with reading and writing and reduces students' resistant stances.

Examining student reading experiences, we focus on emotion to better understand students' experiences and help them navigate their interactions with texts to guide them toward more positive interactions with reading and with their self-perception of themselves as readers.

Initial research into emotions within educational situations focused primarily on test anxiety, but more recent research is moving beyond testing situations and examining how emotions play a role in other learning situations. New research suggests that emotions are critical to not only students' motivation but also their learning and identity development with established links between emotions and student engagement and performance (Pekrun et al.). Achievement emotions, including affective, cognitive, motivational, and physiological, with specific emotions, such as hope, anxiety, pride, and shame, are linked to success and failure (Pekrun et al.). Pekrun et al. suggest that perceptions of control impact the emotions students experience and become particularly important when the student values it but feels a high level of uncertainty about the outcome, which could describe basic writing courses for many of our students. Negative emotions about reading are particularly important to consider because they can trigger a flight or fight reaction, impeding comprehension and interaction with a text (Zambo and Brem). Ultimately, students' achievement emotions affect their use of strategies and their regulation of learning as well as their motivation. Pekrun et al. claim that the impact of emotions is significant and should be examined as part of our scholarship.

Scholars' incorporation of emotion in research about reading and specifically within basic writing contexts may provide researchers and instructors with more information that we can use to better support our students' learning and develop more effective literacy instruction. Abdolrezapour points to several studies that highlight the importance of acknowledging emotions in educational environments and the capacity of emotions to impact academic performance. Particularly, Abdolrezapour claims that emotions play an important role in reading comprehension and that reading comprehension has the potential to transfer to other academic contexts to support overall learning performance. For instructors and scholars of reading-writing connections, specifically in the basic writing classroom, Abdolrezapour's claims substantiate a focus on the emotional responses related to reading.

When we examine student reflections to identify emotional responses, we can start to identify and understand the psychological attitudes of students which Ira James Allen refers to in his article "Reprivileging Reading." As

researchers, when we identify emotions, we can examine the “full sense of experience,” the “phenomenological sense,” of reading that matters to readers. Scholars’ and instructors’ examination of emotions also aligns with the mindful reading suggested by Ellen Carillo, who defines mindful reading as readers being “knowledgeable, deliberate, and reflexive about how they read and the demands that contexts place on their reading” (117). Carillo claims that a reader’s mindful stance creates “an intentional awareness of and attention to the present moment, its context and one’s perspective” (118). Carillo encourages scholars to teach students about reading instead of just assigning and assuming reading familiarity and strategies. Carillo’s perspective on reading in first-year writing is adaptable to basic writing perspectives as well.

Much of the research about emotions that can be applied to basic writing pedagogy focuses primarily on writing and writing instruction. Alice Brand claims that to understand how students write and learn to write, emotional, as well as cognitive, phenomena must be included (436). Brand says that generating meaning is “saturated with affect” (437) even while “emotional neutrality” is used as a test for moral advancement (438). For writing process, Brand claims that students would benefit from understanding their emotional cues, such as those that tell them they are ready to write or ready to stop writing. These same emotional cues could be said to be of benefit to students’ reading, in which they examine not just their thoughts about the content, genre, and applicability of the information, but also their emotional reactions to the process of reading (441). Brand even suggests that writers understand how their emotions are affected by “audience, topic, and time restrictions” (441), all of which are relevant to reading process. Brand claims that examining emotions can help instructors understand why some problems occur and how we can address them by helping students to be aware of and employ emotions during their writing processes (441). Again, this applies to reading in which students may experience problems and can use their affective responses to help them with their reading process, including the cognitive aspects of reading. Micciche claims that emotions are “an integral dimension of all meaning-making and judgment formation” (163). Micciche explains that emotions are essential to change or action, a concept that can be applied to students’ reading processes, especially when they are struggling with texts. Ignoring emotions as part of how students learn is to distance students from their cognitive responses. Instructors who allow and encourage emotions can help students make stronger connections to what they are learning, which is our goal in regard to reading.

What is not typically included in research that examines readers or reading research is the impact of emotional responses in texts and on (non) reader identities. We can better understand student identity constructions and interactions with texts by examining the importance of emotions in these contexts and situations, especially when academic achievement has been correlated in part with emotional intelligence (EI)—the ability to perceive, integrate, understand, and regulate emotions for personal growth. Allen suggests teaching “reading as a mode of negotiating uncertainty,” allowing instructors to examine students’ emotional responses to texts and (non) readerly identities to help students successfully navigate motivations and consider how uncertainty impacts their reading (99). Allen encourages instructors to find ways to make reading safe and points to assignments such as Salvatori and Donahue’s “difficulty paper” as one way to begin the process. Reflective assignments, like the difficulty paper, can expose students’ uncertainty and make reading habits visible to students, who can then use that knowledge to make decisions in reading. The reflective analysis also provides students with meta-awareness that allows them to participate in conversations about what reading can be and why academics read. Allen wants instructors to help students “see their own reading processes more closely, turning their attention to the ways in which they are affected by a text so that they might broaden their horizons of understanding” (115). Ultimately, Allen claims that effective readers understand themselves as experiencers of sensation and as active participants in the reading process. Reflection allows for these reading complexities, such as balancing emotional reactions with externally imposed purposes for reading, to be teased out.

Scholars who focus on foreign language acquisition and specifically foreign language reading (Mikami, Leung, and Yoshikawa) have also examined the role of emotion. In foreign language reading studies, research confirms that “psychological attributes (e.g., motivation, belief and emotion) affect our reading and learning behavior” and are “connected to the development of reading skills through learning behavior” (Mikami et al. 49). Particularly the way that motivation drives actions, what students think about themselves and reading, and their affective states have direct and indirect connections to learning effort and reading behaviors. Students who lack motivation show a negative correlation with reading proficiency, while students who exhibit motivation show a positive correlation with reading proficiency. Similarly, students who struggle with self-belief (i.e., do not believe they are readers or can effectively complete a reading) have a negative correlation with reading proficiency, while students who believe they are readers and

can effectively complete a reading have a positive correlation with reading proficiency. Educators who can draw on this information by understanding their students' motivation and learning identities may be better positioned to help students reduce reading anxiety and engage both emotionally and cognitively with texts.

We believe it is important to better understand the perceptions that college students in basic reading and writing classes hold about readers and reading as these relate to identity and literacy. Many literacy experts, especially those researching middle and high school situations, study the relationship of identity to literacy, or what Elizabeth Moje and Allan Luke call the "identity turn," encouraging research questions about how identity affects literacy in different contexts (415). By viewing literacy in this way, as a social practice, scholars are able to push back against skills-based literacy instruction and the marginalization of struggling readers (Moje and Luke 416). As individuals work to create their own identities, that creation hinges on recognition from others (Gee), and their identities mediate and are mediated by the texts they read (Moje and Luke 416). Theorists have expanded that lens even further, now seeing the construction of space and time as a factor in identity creation (Moje). For college students, this means that their identity is constructed by the space and context of the classroom, the relationship between teacher and student, relationships among students, and placement. According to Moje, Dillon, and O'Brien, as students explore different subject positions and as they are positioned by others, they enact various identities (e.g. good student or resistant student). Classroom discourses about what it means to "do" school are particularly influential in this process as students position themselves by enacting certain kinds of identities, performing different roles to see which ones fit in particular contexts. As students note the outcomes of these interactions, they further define how they see themselves as students (Fairbanks and Ariail). These identities can range from agentive, in which students view themselves as responsible for learning, to passive, in which students view themselves as dependent on others for learning (Johnson). For students who view themselves as non-experts, or perhaps struggling readers (either as a socially derived identification or one attributed to the student through testing and placement procedures), these "identities" shape how they see themselves and also how they learn and interact in classrooms (McCarthy and Moje; Wortham).

We think there is potential importance to examining students' identity constructions within basic writing classes as it relates to writing. We bring this perspective into our research through the use of reflective assignments

that ask students to examine readerly identities of themselves and others. In our project, we look at how students' reflections about texts, reading, and being readers, specifically their emotional responses, help them to learn about themselves as readers. In the examination of emotions, instructors, especially of students in basic writing courses, can better understand how to help students negotiate the demands of academic reading and of identifying as a reader (Allen 99). Through our research, we show that students in basic reading and writing classes experience complex emotional responses when reading. These emotions play an important role in how they interact with texts and how they view themselves as readers and learners. Specifically, our research suggests students experience a disassociation with a readerly identity as they transition to college while they still maintain a sense of hope for developing reading strategies and identifying as readers in the future.

### **The Design of Our Study**

Our study takes place at a large public, research university. Student course placement decisions were based on either standardized test scores or student-submitted writing portfolios. A mandated lowering of placement scores from the state level initiated a new course to support students who would have previously placed into a non-credit bearing basic writing course but were now placed into a three-course combination, which included a merged basic writing and first-year curriculum, a course dedicated to editing for style, and a rhetorical reading course. This course combination was credit bearing; however, because it required extra units, students might perceive it as a form of remediation. The three-course sequence and specifically the reading specific course were considered a form of intervention on our campus, and class sizes were under 15 students for the reading course. Students placed into the rhetorical reading course were considered under-prepared for first-year composition and therefore labeled by the institution as basic readers and writers.

This institutional shift offered us a kairotic moment to ask many of the questions that education scholars have asked about literacy experiences. Specifically, we explored the effects of identity and perceptions on literacy. Our initial research question was focused on how students in basic reading and writing courses perceive reading *and* themselves as readers. To explore our research question, we collected reflective texts from students and analyzed emotional responses in those texts.



The reflective texts came from students in one reading course. For the first text, students reflected on difficulties they encountered when reading texts (an assignment inspired by Salvatori and Donahue *The Elements and Pleasures of Difficulty*). Our difficulty paper assignment asked students to identify specific difficulties they encountered when reading a complex text, noting moments that were confusing, were frustrating, left them with questions, and/or complicated their reading process. Students were encouraged to focus on one or two examples and discuss ways they were able to move beyond these difficulties. For the second reflective text, students discussed their perceptions of ideal college readers; specifically, students were asked to identify characteristics of effective college readers based on their experiences as well as an interview with another student who they felt was a good reader, and to compare their perceptions of themselves as readers with their description of a good college reader. We had a small sample size of 9 for the ideal reader texts, and 16 for the difficulty papers written about “A Modest Proposal” (Swift) and “Tattooing the Body, Marking Culture” (Fisher).

Initially, we examined the reflective essays using the grounded theory method (Corbin and Strauss), looking for patterns of language use about reading and readers. We discussed the patterns then reread the essays to identify specific instances of the patterns identified. In our first round of coding, we identified the following categories: identity, self-efficacy, and agency. However, as we started to re-code for these categories, further distinctions among the original codes emerged. We then had definitions of reading (i.e. passive or active descriptions of reading), problem-focused and emotion-focused relationships to reading, themes of difficulty, and identity. Once we agreed upon the codes, we both re-coded every student essay confirming that we had inter-rater reliability.

Since grounded theory method requires flexibility and willingness to keep an open mind with the data, we coded and discussed and revised our analysis several times. However, upon further reflection, we discovered that the emotion-focused relationships to reading in the student reflections warranted further analysis. To do so, we moved away from grounded theory and embraced research on the relationship between students and emotions.

We read through the student reflections again, coding emotional reactions students expressed by using achievement emotions identified by educational psychologists Pekrun et al. Achievement emotions are those that students commonly experience in academic settings. Pekrun et al. categorize these emotions in three ways: prospective outcomes, retrospective outcomes, and current achievement-related outcomes. Students experience emotions—

such as hope, anxiety, and hopelessness—when predicting possible success or failure: prospective outcomes. They also experience emotions—such as pride, relief, and shame—when recalling past success or failure: retrospective outcomes. In addition, students experience emotions—such as enjoyment, boredom, and anger—related to current achievement activities. According to Pekrun et al., achievement emotions “are induced when the individual feels in control of, or out of control of, activities and outcomes that are subjectively important” (38).

We first coded the ideal reader reflections using these nine emotions from three categories: prospective (hope, anxiety, and hopelessness), retrospective (pride, relief, shame), and current (enjoyment, boredom, anger). These emotions frequently occur for students and represent a range of positive and negative emotions. To code them, we first determined if the student was expressing an emotion. We then determined whether the emotion was prospective, retrospective, or current. Finally, we determined where it fell within that category. We coded each instance at the sentence level. After coding the ideal reader reflections independently, we then confirmed interrater reliability. Then, we coded the difficulty papers using the same method. See Table 1 for a summary of our coding categories.

Certainly our study has several limitations, which must be acknowledged. First, using the reflective essays from one class gives us a focused but limited sample. Second, since we are looking at texts completed for the purposes of a basic critical reading class, our analysis only includes the information presented in the essays. Adding in interviews with students could expand our understanding of how students in basic writing and reading-writing integrated courses address reading assignments and specifically how they interact with texts. Third, the reading course from which this sample was derived was a linked reading course. It would be useful to have similar studies completed in integrated reading-writing courses. A fourth possible limitation is the honesty that students used in their assignments regarding their emotional responses, but we must trust that they were responding

honestly. Despite these limitations, we believe that the recursive coding, inter-rater reliability, and the analysis of the findings contribute to literacy scholarship and to a foundation on which other post-secondary reading research can build.

**Table 1.** Summary of Our Coding Categories

<b>Prospective:</b>	<b>Current:</b>	<b>Retrospective:</b>
<b>Hope:</b> Reflection on the future and the possibility for growth and change	<b>Enjoyment:</b> Expression of pleasure in current reading tasks	<b>Pride:</b> Reflection of past or former feelings of pride or accomplishment related to reading tasks
<b>Anxiety:</b> Reflection on the future with concern and stress for what is to come	<b>Boredom:</b> Expression of boredom or lack of interest in current reading tasks	<b>Relief:</b> Reflection of past or former feelings of relief in completing reading tasks
<b>Hopelessness:</b> Reflection on the future with no hope for change or control	<b>Anger:</b> Expression of frustration or anger on current reading tasks	<b>Shame:</b> Reflection of past or former feelings of shame related to not reading, enjoying reading, or reading enough

**Perceptions of Readers and Reading**

During our initial, open coding, we confirmed several findings made previously by other researchers. Overall, we found that students in our study have a debilitating perception of college readers and reading. Students believe that ideal college readers consistently read a text multiple times, read quickly, avoid distraction, and annotate effectively. According to the students, ideal readers (e.g. effective college readers) do not struggle with long documents or comprehension of difficult texts and easily analyze texts whether topics are familiar or unfamiliar. These ideal readers read even if there is no incen-

tive, and ideal readers never procrastinate. In fact, ideal college readers do all of this and enjoy the process at least most of the time. Obviously, this list of what ideal readers do would overwhelm even the most practiced and proficient reader. Notably, the students in the basic reading course had the perception that reading comes easily for effective readers and requires minimal effort. In addition, they dis-identify as ideal readers, instead identifying primarily as non-readers. This finding that students who have been labeled as struggling by an additional reading course (i.e. remediation) has been well explored by Leigh Hall in her work on middle school students. Our findings further strengthen that understanding.

We also found that students viewed reading as a task designed for information gathering, with themselves as receptacles for reading, rather than reading as a process of construction or meaning making. Students expected texts to provide them with information with little effort on their part as readers. Several scholars have noted that convincing college students that reading is an act of construction is difficult because the educational system, in which the students are enmeshed, favors factual recall (Halpern; McCormick; Santa). Our finding further confirms, not necessarily the cause of students wanting texts to just provide information, but that they do still hold this expectation, or what Hall calls a print-centric view of texts.

Specific to impeding the students' ability to complete and comprehend the readings were two specific challenges: vocabulary and interest. Students were often challenged not only by a lack of understanding of what words meant but also by the unfamiliarity of language or usage. Lei et al. note the importance of "a large vocabulary" to understand college-level reading (40). In addition to discussing the difficulty of vocabulary, students also mentioned their struggles with interest, or lack thereof. While students imagined an ideal reader who was interested in all texts, but who could read adeptly even when not interested, the students identified with the typical college student who suffered from a lack of interest. Jolliffe and Harl made a similar finding when they surveyed college students and found that students describe assigned texts in college as dreadfully dull.

Since our initial findings corroborated existing research, we returned to our data to examine other ways that the students were discussing reading and being readers. Through our further exploration of students' retrospective, current, and prospective emotional responses to reading, we found that students' emotions were actively impacting their reading as well as their perceptions of themselves as readers. Examining the different activity emotions and the ways in which emotions were used by students in this course,

we are able to examine their reading interactions and relationships in new ways. See Table 2 for our full findings.

**Table 2.** Findings: Total Instances of Achievement-Related Emotions

		<b>Diff. Paper</b>	<b>Ideal Reader</b>
<b>Prospective</b>	Hope	2	3
	Anxiety	1	3
	Hopelessness	0	1
<b>Current</b>	Enjoyment	10	19
	Boredom	27	18
	Anger	41	24
<b>Retrospective</b>	Pride	1	5
	Relief	1	0
	Shame	2	2

### **Reflecting on the Past: A Loss of Pride and Confidence as Readers**

The emotions students expressed in their reflections about their past experiences as readers most often suggested a loss of pride and confidence as readers, especially as it related to transitioning to college-level reading situations. Most of the reflections about past emotional responses to texts were identified in the ideal reader assignments. When reflecting on their past selves as readers, the emotions that emerged vacillated between pride/competence and shame/inadequacy. Difficulty papers (16 papers total) only produced four (4) total instances of emotional reflections on the past: two (2) of shame (50%), one (1) of pride (25%), and one (1) of relief (25%). In comparison, in one ideal reader paper, there were seven instances (7) reflecting on the past: five (5) of pride (71.4%) and two (2) of shame (28.6%).

When students expressed feelings of pride in their past selves, they pointed to being good readers, who had once found pleasure in reading and who read a lot when they were younger or prior to coming to college. For example, one student said, “I used to be able to read for fun.” This same student followed that comment with “but not anymore.” Students suggested that their relationship with reading was positive in elementary and middle schools but less frequently mentioned their relationship with reading in high school reflections. One student said, “I figured that being able to read a chapter book like *Harry Potter* and finish it in a couple of days made me a good reader.” Many students indicated that choice was more prevalent when

they were younger and that the control they had over texts created motivation to engage with texts in different ways as well as more frequently: "I had motivation, because I either had nothing else to do, or I had leftover time in my day to read my new magazine or my favorite book." Students reflected on difficult reading experiences they were able to complete and comprehend with a sense of pride: "I have recently learned how to use different strategies to make it easier for me to enjoy reading and writing." Students who expressed pride were almost always hopeful about their future reader identities.

In contrast with their positive reflective emotions, students who expressed feelings of inadequacy wrote about feeling unprepared for being a reader at a college level: "I have learned that as a reader I need to be more disciplined." Another student said, "In comparison with the ideal college reader, I find myself nowhere close to what is expected." Students expressed anxiety that their reading for enjoyment, such as loving and consuming the *Harry Potter* series when they were younger, did not help to prepare them to be engaged readers in college. One student wrote, "I think as a reader, I am only good when I read something I actually want to read."

Shame was noted in a few papers; however, it was not a frequently coded emotion, with only 13 instances total. When shame was noted, students were discussing not being a good reader or not identifying as a reader: "I actually struggle reading a whole book or even a short story"; "I found out the harsh reality that I actually was a reader that had many difficulties when it came to academic readings."

There was only one instance of the emotion "relief," which occurred in a difficulty paper referring to completing the text: "Eventually I was able to do it and finish the article without too much difficulty."

The focus on the past in the ideal reader reflections suggests that these students were experiencing a cultural shift that was affecting their engagement with texts. They noted how their identity as a reader in the past did not always fit with the expectations of their college contexts. Their readerly identities also related to their sense of motivation, such as only being a good reader if they enjoyed the text. They expressed a sense of loss and longing in their relationships with reading. They implied a sense of imposter syndrome as they were attempting to engage with texts, trying different techniques, and holding onto hope for the future.

### **Current Achievement-Related Emotions: Bugged Down by Boredom and Frustration**

The emotional responses that students expressed relating to their current reading experiences were most frequently negative and suggested that they got stuck in this emotional response. When students reflected on the ideal reader, they often described their general experience reading during their first semester of college, or current achievement-related emotions. As we expected, these emotions moved among the three types recorded by educational psychologists—enjoyment, boredom, and anger or frustration. Out of the 16 difficulty papers from this class, there were seventy-eight (78) total instances of current achievement related emotions: ten (10) of enjoyment (12.8%), twenty-seven (27) of boredom (34.6%), and forty-one (41) of anger or frustration (52.6%). From a statistical perspective, students were not enjoying their reading experiences 87.1% of the time. In comparison, in the nine ideal reader reflections there were sixty-one (61) total instances of current achievement-related emotions: nineteen (19) of enjoyment (31.1%), eighteen (18) of boredom (29.6%), and twenty-four (24) of anger or frustration (39.3%).

Unfortunately, enjoyment was not the primary emotion students felt while reading for college. Instead, it was either an imagined emotion, projected onto the ideal reader—that person who enjoys academic texts, who can pick up any text on any subject, sit down and read it well, with little difficulty, and a lot of pleasure. Or it was a reflection on enjoyment they experienced reading anything outside of the college setting. When discussing what they enjoyed reading outside of the college setting, students often referred to genres or types of texts. For example, one student wrote “The main things I like to read and that motivate me are magazines, pretty much any kind. . . and definitely any good novel that I find.” A different student shared a similar sentiment: “Reading is one of my favorite things to do in my free time. . . cuddling up with my blankets and pillows with my current read is relaxing and entertaining.” In general, the students who identified as readers shared enjoyable emotions when they were reflecting on reading done beyond the confines of academic settings. The exception is the imagined ideal reader for many of these students. For example, another student, one who did not include any information about self enjoyment, said, “The ideal college reader reads for pleasure not just because they are forced to. They enjoy picking up books and reading about something they did not know before.”

## Frustration and Hope

In contrast, more students experienced boredom and frustration or anger during the task of reading for college. Primarily, the content in academic texts bored students. For example, one student said, “I do not normally read academic journals or texts, unless I am required to. I find them to be monotonous.” The boredom they reflected sometimes extended beyond the composition classroom: “When given an assigned article to read or a chapter of a textbook for class, I don’t get too excited, especially if it is from my economics book, or an article on statistical facts.”

Academic texts frustrated the students; however, the frustration and anger was often directed at the course or the professor because the reading was not actually needed for learning. They also expressed anger because the joy of reading they once experienced has been taken away from them—caused by too many reading assignments, dull reading assignments, and pointless reading assignments. For example, one student shared the following frustration in her reflection:

I wanted to crawl into my bed, hide, and never come out [after assessing all of the reading the student had to complete over a weekend]. I couldn’t understand how my professors expected this out of their students. By the time I have finished the assigned chapters, my eyes are strained, I am tired, and I am most likely so stressed out I want to fall asleep. It gets frustrating when students take a lot of classes, like myself.

The student identified as a reader, but her frustration was derived from her inability to find enjoyment in her assigned college reading tasks. Another student shared frustration that was also directed at the professors or college: “We don’t want to read these long and seemingly pointless stories for fun, and that is why many of us have a hard time getting the full meaning out of a piece of text.” Students pushed back against reading that did not have a clear purpose or interest to them.

While the ideal reader reflections gave us information about the emotions that students brought to the task of reading, the difficulty papers further confirmed that students are primarily frustrated and bored when reading for college. On one hand, the difficulty paper as an assignment invites students to share emotions like frustration and boredom. The entire premise of the assignment supports students using negative emotions as a way into a text. However, it is interesting to note that the two texts students wrote difficulty papers about varied in topic and genre—two things that students suggested



affected their emotional responses to reading. “A Modest Proposal” is a genre with which students may already engage—satire. And the other text explored tattoos, a topic that one might suspect interests students. Despite these connections that students could potentially make—either through genre or topic—they did not respond with positive emotions, instead expressing anger because of the content or boredom because of the academic characteristics of the text.

When responding to “A Modest Proposal,” all the students responded with some boredom or frustration. Even students who understood that the text is satirical could not move past the emotional response they had to the topic: “Although I was very well aware of the fact that this essay was satire, it was still very difficult for me to get past it while I was reading.” For those students who read the text literally, the emotional response of anger and frustration was even stronger: “Since he was so graphic with disgusting details, I found myself not wanting to read more.” These emotional responses lead us to question the value of triggering strong emotional responses to texts and how those intense emotions may shut down the reading process.

Emotional responses to the academic journal article on tattoos were different, yet still exclusively negative. The emotional response of boredom and anger was not about the topic, but instead how journal articles are written. Students may benefit from more instruction on how to read journal articles: what to look for and how to negotiate their understanding of texts. Doug Downs has advocated for us to teach students to read journal articles not for information, but instead to understand provisional arguments. Ira James Allen has suggested we help students negotiate uncertainty when reading. However, the students’ responses to the academic journal article as a genre were primarily based on their emotional reactions. While students’ emotional reactions may be partially due to a lack of strategies to use for reading journal articles, their emotional reactions of boredom and frustration may require acknowledgement and further exploration: “Facts, statistics, numbers, and references are difficult for me to read through, as I often get bored and want to skim over the paper until I find something interesting.” Even for a student who said the topic of Fisher’s article, tattoos, was more interesting than Swift’s, the genre of the academic article generated negative emotions: “Right off the bat I knew this [reading a 17 page academic article] was going to be a challenging assignment.” These responses suggest that helping students get past emotional reactions is needed before a student can engage in applying strategies, such as Allen’s negotiating uncertainty or Downs’ considering provisional arguments.

### **Projecting to the Future—Students Are Hopeful**

Hope about developing as readers was the most common emotion expressed by students when they were projecting about the future. As with reflecting on the past, the majority of emotional references that projected to the future were in the ideal reader papers. Out of the 16 difficulty papers from this class, there were three (3) total instances of projecting to the future in the difficulty papers: two (2) of hope and one (1) of anxiety. In comparison, in one ideal reader reflection there were seven (7) total instances of projecting to the future: three (3) of hope, three (3) of anxiety, and one (1) of hopelessness.

In the ideal reader texts, students projecting about their future most strongly expressed hope. There was only one (1) instance of hopelessness (4.6%); three (3) instances of anxiety (13.6%); and 18 instances of hope (81.8%). Students believed they were on the right path, developing their abilities to read academically: “I am nowhere near my idea of the ideal college reader, but as the year goes on I am getting closer and closer.” Students have hope that they can become better academic readers: “I may not be the best right now, but I think I am certainly working on ways to get there.” They note that focusing on reading academically helps them, but highlight their lack of engagement. Additionally, students who were hopeful about themselves as readers talked about returning to reading for pleasure as a way to improve as readers more broadly: “If I pick up a book from those genres [genres the student enjoys] I think I could have a chance of enjoying it.” Students equated enjoying reading with being a good reader in their reflections and so sought ways to anticipate this outcome in their futures.

Even with the positive position that most students took about their future relationships with reading, they still expressed some anxiety about not being their version of an ideal reader or not ever becoming one. One student noted, “For example, if a student had to read an academic article, they would probably be uninterested in it because not many people like to read those types of articles.” Another student commented on their anxiety about finding pleasure in reading: “It might be a challenge because I do not see myself reading for enjoyment anytime soon.” Students understood that they would need to read texts they were not engaged in: “To be a good student you have to be able to read and write on what you really love and enjoy, but also on topics that are the exact opposite.” While students expressed anxiety and hope, they often indicated that they wanted to identify as readers and specifically as good readers; they noted the primary hurdle to accomplishing this was finding purpose in reading tasks that they had not chosen.

There was almost no expression of hopelessness, but the one instance was notable: “I do not think I’ll ever be able to just be able to read a book whenever and wherever.” This student’s hopelessness extended beyond their academic experiences and into their projections of their life experiences, indicating a sense of not being able to identify as a reader (even if they wanted to) and experiencing a loss of motivation because of this.

## **Implications**

Much like the students in the reading class, we see a great deal of hope in our findings. The emotions students felt about being college readers (examining their current situations, not their past experiences or projecting to their future experiences) spanned a range of emotions from enjoyment, into boredom, and then to anger. Still, through the reflective assignment asking students to examine their conceptualization of an ideal college reader (an assignment given in the latter part of the semester), we were able to see additional emotions experienced, with two discoveries proving particularly promising. First, when students reflected on the future, the emotions felt were hopeful, specifically about being able to see themselves as identifying as readers in the future (even if they did not identify as a reader in the current context). Anxiety about the future was also felt, but hopelessness was almost nonexistent. Second, when reflecting on the past, the majority of students in this study had previously identified as a reader, as someone who enjoyed reading for the simple pleasure of reading. These reflections on past enjoyment were marred by current displeasure in the difficulty and the sheer overwhelming amount of college-level academic reading. Since we are capturing a moment when students are taking their first semester of college composition, we might argue that students transitioning to college, and specifically students in basic writing and reading courses, are suspended between hope that they can become better readers and anxiety for the types of texts they will encounter and their ability to understand those texts. Students want to see themselves as becoming more competent and confident readers of academic texts even as they long for the return of reading for pleasure. These emotions were not something we were aware of before we integrated these reflective assignments into the reading classroom, but the discoveries support the recommendations from scholars like Ellen Carillo, Mariolina Salvatori, and Ira James Allen who advocate for continued rediscovery of how students experience reading.

The lack of hopelessness remains the most surprising and promising finding from our study. Students believe that it is possible to become more like their idealized version of college readers. In the ideal reader reflections, hope was an expressed emotion 16 times, the most predominant emotion when students reflected on the future. Typically, when discussing readers who may struggle, issues of identity complicate the students' abilities to develop reading practices (see Hall). Yet when we study reading through the lens of emotion, we are able to see the possibilities for developing new reading practices through students' positive projections about their future reading identities. As Pekrun et al. note, "positive activating emotions are likely beneficial for students' engagement and learning, whereas negative deactivation emotions are likely detrimental" to learning and performance (45). Further, positive emotions, like hope, correlate positively to "intrinsic motivation, effort, elaboration of learning material, and self-regulation of learning" (Pekrun et al., 45). In other words, the hope students feel for their future as academic readers (and the lack of hopelessness) will help them succeed.

A less positive, but still promising, finding was that students lamented their loss of reading for pleasure. When reflecting on the past, students primarily expressed pride in their past reading enjoyment, with 18 instances in the ideal reader reflections. In contrast, shame about their loss of reading for pleasure was mentioned 11 times. Since it is a moment of transition for students, this vacillation between shame and pride is notable. Deborah Brandt through her ethnographic studies has shown that reading is remembered fondly. Her research participants have fond memories of their parents reading to them as children. Several of the students in this reading class had similar fond memories of their enjoyment of books. They sounded like Ira James Allen in his own reflections as a person interpellated as a reader, the privileged readers that many of us, as professors, graduate students, or undergraduate students often identify as. Particularly in transitional moments, like the first semester of college or the first semester of a doctorate program, the task of reading can change, and students may not be aware of how to read for new purposes or how to approach more difficult texts. With the changes in their perceptions of themselves as competent and confident readers, students may experience feelings of shame that they are encountering difficulties as readers, as our findings suggest.

So what does this mean for us as researchers and teachers of students in basic reading and writing courses? Reflective assignments that encourage metacognitive examination provide opportunities for instructors and stu-

dents to better understand what their reactions are to texts and why those are their reactions. This is similar to the suggestions of Ellen Carillo, a first-year composition scholar, who advocates for the inclusion of assignments that help students develop as mindful readers through improved metacognition. Mindful reading activities, such as those suggested by Carillo and used in this study, allow students to become more aware of their current reading practices. Our study also suggests that we should also assign reflective assignments that encourage students to reflect on their past and their future as a way to further explore their practices and develop the metacognition necessary to make purposeful choices when reading in college. Our findings echo the recommendations of Driscoll and Powell that instructors can help students become emotional managers, which will help students gain control and be able to use their emotions in the ways suggested by Brand. By understanding their responses to academic reading, students may be able to work more toward understanding of difficult texts and avoid getting stuck in their initial responses. Reflecting on their future selves as college readers may evoke positive emotions that may help them persist as college students. This reflective approach is being used by scholars who focus more on writing, such as the scholarship on reflection included in Kathleen Blake Yancey's book *A Rhetoric of Reflection*. Reflection can become a tool to help students develop "strategic self-management" as Susan McCleod suggests (33).

Second, understanding the relationships our students develop with reading, such as their emotional responses to texts, may offer authentic opportunities to help students move from the passive positions of information receivers to more active roles of information makers. Reflecting on their emotional responses to texts they read may help students see that readers make meaning, not just receive information. Instructors could help students examine their emotional responses and help them see how they can use their reactions to examine the texts they are assigned. Moving students into positions of inquiry about their reading responses, specifically their emotional reactions, could help them see themselves as active participants and start to shape their reader identities in ways that could lead to more engagement.

Third, our findings suggest that we should continue to give students more choice with reading. To address students' concerns with their sense of loss (for enjoying reading) and lack of control (with content and genre), allowing students more choices in text selections may offer ways for students to reconnect with their identities as readers. The concept of control, as discussed by Pekrun et al., can have motivating implications for learners, offering something from which our students in basic reading and writing

courses can greatly benefit. While there is a need for students to learn how to read assigned texts in which they don't have choice, offering them the choice of a few texts selected by the instructor may help motivate students to better understand the text they selected. Additionally, choice could be offered in how students demonstrate their understanding of a text, such as offering different options to assess comprehension, such as summarizing the text or responding to comprehension questions. Providing students with some options to control aspects of their academic reading situations may offer more points of access for our students in basic reading and writing courses as well more motivation to move past difficulties, emotional or other, that students encounter while reading.

Finally, the emotional responses students had when reading "A Modest Proposal" show us that we should continue to research the place of emotion in the classroom. Some of the students had visceral reactions to the thought of eating babies, even those students who knew it was satire. But as teachers what do we do with these emotions? If we ask students to read a text that triggers them emotionally, to the point of anger, does that hinder their learning? Wenger has argued that we embrace emotion in the composition classroom. However, we need to discuss further how that can best be achieved knowing that this extensive research in educational psychology has shown that anger may hinder learning.

Ultimately, our research points to the individual emotional complexities that students encounter in literacy instruction that makes singular approaches to reading instruction ineffective. Instructors of basic writing can use reflective assignments that allow students to explore their transactions with texts, and their relationships with reading may begin to help students transition to college reading and writing. Scholars' examination of student emotions helps address these complexities and encourages instructors to differentiate for students' learning needs. Our research investigated what emotions our students had and how those emotions influenced their sense of efficacy and identity as readers. We argue for more scholarly examination of the role of emotions in reading and basic writing research. By making these arguments, we strive to continue pushing reading into the center of the conversation while adding new layers of research to better understand the challenges of reading and being a reader in our current educational climate.

### Works Cited

- Abdolrezapour, Parisa. "Improving L2 Reading Comprehension through Emotionalized Dynamic Assessment Procedures." *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2017, pp. 747-70.
- Allen, Ira J. "Reprivileging Reading." *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2012, pp. 97-120.
- Beers, Kylene. *When Kids Can't Read: What Teachers Can Do*. Heinemann, 2003.
- Brand, Alice G. "The Why of Cognition: Emotion and the Writing Process." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 38, no. 4, 1987, pp. 436-43.
- Brandt, Deborah. "Remembering Writing, Remembering Reading." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 45, no. 4, 1994, pp. 459-79.
- Bunn, Michael. "Motivation and Connection: Teaching Reading (and Writing) in the Composition Classroom." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 64, no. 3, 2013, pp. 496-516.
- Carillo, Ellen C. *Securing a Place for Reading in Composition: The Importance of Teaching for Transfer*, Utah State UP, 2014.
- Corbin, Juliet, and Anselm Strauss, eds. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Sage, 2008.
- Downs, Doug. "Teaching First-Year Writers to Use Texts: Scholarly Readings in Writing-About Writing in First-Year Comp." *Reader: Essays in Reader-Oriented Theory, Criticism, and Pedagogy*, vol. 60, 2010, pp. 19-50.
- Driscoll, Dana L., and Roger Powell. "States, Traits, and Dispositions: The Impact of Emotion on Writing Development and Writing Transfer Across College Courses and Beyond." *Composition Forum*, vol. 34, 2016.
- Fairbanks, Colleen M., and Mary Ariail. "The Role of Social and Cultural Resources in Literacy and Schooling: Three Contrasting Cases." *Research in the Teaching of English*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2006, pp. 310-54.
- Fisher, Jill A. "Tattooing the Body, Marking Culture." *Body and Society*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2002, pp. 91-107.
- Gee, James Paul. *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses*. 3rd ed. Routledge, 2008.
- Gogan, Brian. "Reading at the Threshold." *Across the Disciplines*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2013, [wac.colostate.edu/atd/reading/gogan.cfm](http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/reading/gogan.cfm). Accessed 11 June 2009.

- Hall, Leigh A. "Struggling Reader, Struggling Teacher: An Examination of Student-Teacher Transactions with Reading Instruction and Text in Social Studies." *Research in the Teaching of English*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2009, pp. 286-309.
- Halpern, Faye. "In Defense of Reading Badly: The Politics of Identification in 'Benito Cereño,' *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Our Classrooms." *College English*, vol. 70, no. 6, 2008, pp. 551- 77.
- Hock, Michael F., Irma F. Brasseur, Donald D. Deshler, Hugh W. Catts, Janet G. Marquis, Caroline A. Mark, and Jean Wu Stribling. "What is the Reading Component Skill Profile of Adolescent Struggling Readers in Urban Schools?" *Learning Disability Quarterly*, vol. 32, Winter 2009, pp. 21-38.
- Hock, Michael F., and Donald D. Deshler. "Don't Forget the Adolescents." *Principal Leadership*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2003, pp. 50-56.
- Johnson, Karen E. *Understanding Language Teaching: Reasoning in Action*. Heinle & Heinle, 1999.
- Jolliffe, David A., and Allison Harl. "Texts of Our Institutional Lives: Studying the 'Reading Transition' from High School to College: What Are Our Students Reading and Why?" *College English*, vol. 70, no. 6, 2008, pp. 599-617.
- Kieffer, Michael, and Nonie Lesaux. "Morphing into Adolescents: Active Word Learning for English-Language Learners and their Classmates in Middle School." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2010, pp 47-56.
- Leathwood, Carole, and Valerie Hey. "Gender/ed Discourses and Emotional Sub-Texts: Theorising Emotion in UK Higher Education." *Teaching in Higher Education*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2009, pp. 429-40.
- Lei, Simon A., Patricia J. Rhinehart, Holly A. Howard, and Jonathan K. Cho. "Strategies for Improving Reading Comprehension among College Students." *Reading Improvement*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2010, pp. 30-43.
- Lockhart, Tara, and Mary Soliday. "The Critical Place of Reading in Writing Transfer (and Beyond)." *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2016, pp. 23-37.
- McCarthy, Sarah J., and Elizabeth Birr Moje. "Identity Matters." *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2002, pp. 228-38.
- McCormick, Kathleen. *The Culture of Reading and the Teaching of English*. Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 1994.
- McLeod, Susan H. *Notes on the Heart: Affective Issues in the Writing Classroom*. Southern Illinois UP, Carbondale, 1997.



- Micciche, Laura. "Emotion, Ethics, and Rhetorical Action." *JAC*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2005, pp. 161-84.
- Mikami, Hitoshi, Chi Y. Leung, and Lisa Yoshikawa. "Psychological Attributes in Foreign Language Reading: An Explorative Study of Japanese College Students." *Reading Matrix: An International Online Journal*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2016, pp. 49-62.
- Moje, Elizabeth Birr. "Developing Socially Just Subject-Matter Instruction: A Review of the Literature on Disciplinary Literacy Teaching." *Review of Research in Education*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2007, pp. 1-44.
- Moje, Elizabeth Birr, and Allan Luke. "Literacy and Identity: Examining the Metaphors in History and Contemporary Research." *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2009, pp. 415-37.
- Moje, Elizabeth Birr, Deborah R. Dillon, and David O'Brien. "Reexamining Roles of Learner, Text, and Context in Secondary Literacy." *The Journal of Educational Research: New Discoveries in Literacy for the 21st Century*, vol. 93, no. 3, 2000, pp. 165-180.
- Pekrun, Reinhard, Thomas Goetz, Ann C. Frenzel, Petra Barchfeld, and Raymond P. Perry. "Measuring Emotions in Students' Learning and Performance: The Achievement Emotions Questionnaire (AEQ)." *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2011, pp. 36-48.
- Riddle, Marsha B., and Roxann R. Rose. "Mandates, Expectations, and Change." *Primary Voices K - 6*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2001, pp. 3-6.
- Rosenblatt, Louise M. "The Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing." *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading*, edited by Ruddell, Robert B. and Norman J. Unrau. 5th ed. International Reading Association, 2004, pp. 1363-98.
- Salvatori, Mariolina Rizzi, and Patricia Donahue. *The Elements (and Pleasures) of Difficulty*. Pearson Longman, 2005.
- Salvatori, Mariolina Rizzi, and Patricia Donahue. "What Is College English? Stories About Reading: Appearance, Disappearance, Morphing, and Revival." *College English*, vol. 75, no. 2, 2012, pp. 199-217.
- Santa, Tracy. "Disrupting Closure: Making Reading Visible." *Reader: Essays in Reader-Oriented Theory, Criticism, and Pedagogy*, vol. 62, 2012, pp. 65-77.
- Smith, Cheryl Hogue. "Interrogating Texts: From Deferent to Efferent and Aesthetic Reading Practices." *Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2012, pp. 59-80.
- Sweeney, Meghan A., and Maureen McBride. "Difficulty Paper (Dis)Connections: Understanding the Threads Students Weave between their

## Frustration and Hope

- Reading and Writing." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 66, no. 4, 2015, pp. 591-614.
- Swift, Jonathan, 1667-1745. *A Modest Proposal*. Project Gutenberg.
- Wenger, Christy I. "Feeling Lore': The 'Problem' of Emotion in the Practice of Teaching." *English Teaching-Practice and Critique*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2011, pp. 45-59.
- Wortham, Stanton. "From Good Student to Outcast: The Emergence of A Classroom Identity." *Ethos*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2004, pp. 164-87.
- Yancey, Kathleen. *A Rhetoric of Reflection*. Utah State UP, 2016.
- Zambo, Debby, and Sarah K. Brem. "Emotion and Cognition in Students Who Struggle to Read: New Insights and Ideas." *Reading Psychology*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2004, pp. 189-204.