Social Annotation and Layered Readings in Composition

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Scholars have described numerous accumulated purposes for reading in composition courses, but students’ reading practices remain largely invisible to instructors. Recent developments in social annotation tools allow readers to share the margins of digital texts, transforming reading from a private to a public activity. These tools make visible the reading of students, several or a whole class at a time, and at multiple points in the term so that instructors can learn from and provide feedback on students’ reading practices. Results of a study of social annotation in first-year composition indicate that students, rather than approaching texts with a single purpose, shift among and layer reading lenses to focus on reading for ideas, rhetorical reading, critical reading, and aesthetic reading. The purposes for and ways of reading made visible in this study inform the design of reading instruction in the composition course to develop students’ reading strategies to improve their writing development.

Recently published special reading-focused issues of Pedagogy (Salvatori and Donahue, 2016) and WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship (Carillo, 2017), Horning and Kraemer’s (2013) Reconnecting Writing and Reading, and Sullivan, Tinberg, and Blau’s (2017) Deep Reading signal a resurgence of interest in reading in composition studies. Jolliffe (2017) recognizes this trend when he revisits his review of reading in composition though he notes that the field “need[s] to think more deeply about our definitions of readers and reading” (p. 19). Compositionists may be moving past the first problem of reading, in that instructors are acknowledging a connection between reading and writing instruction. Still even those instructors who do acknowledge a responsibility to teach reading may not understand how to teach it in ways that lead to improved writing. Carillo (2015), for example, finds that although 90% of instructors see reading as important in their writing classrooms, 51% “do not feel secure in their abilities to teach reading” (p. 32). Some of this insecurity may be the result of competing theories to describe what it means to read well in first-year composition.

This study aims to inform instructor understanding by naming the ways of reading reflected in composition scholarship and studying the extent to which students employ each lens through technology-mediated reading.
in first-year composition (FYC). With the purposes for and stances with which composition students read made visible through social annotation technology, instructors can design more effective pedagogical interventions to ensure that students learn to read in ways that will help them to develop as writers.

Below I describe four broad reading purposes in composition drawn from our collective history which continue to be reflected in current scholarship: rhetorical reading, reading for ideas, critical reading, and aesthetic reading. Together these four broad reading purposes provide a heuristic for studying alignment between pedagogy and students’ reading practices as mediated through social annotation.

Relationships Among Ways of Reading

Reviewing references to reading instruction in *College Composition and Communication (CCC)* reveals four broad shifts in our collective understanding of the role of reading in composition. The earliest *CCC* articles attempt to quantify student reading practices in terms of comprehension and efficiency (J. I. Brown, 1953; Jackson, 1950). Later, Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reading (Rosenblatt, 1969) helped our field redefine reading as a process constructing meaning with the text through attention to analysis, interpretation, and evaluation (Memering, 1977; Meyer, 1982). While Rosenblatt’s influence continued to generate interest through the 1980s and 1990s (Salvatori, 1996), composition scholars also began to critique reader-response theories proposing critical reading as a practice situated within and for understanding social discourses (Haas and Flower, 1988; Recchio, 1991). More recently, the field has emphasized rhetorical reading (Adler-Kassner and Estrem, 2007; Bunn, 2011). Importantly, our field has not discarded any of these historical ways of reading; rather, they have accumulated over time to create layers of expectations for reading (Keller, 2014).

Rhetorical Reading

Contemporary composition scholars often emphasize rhetorical reading as a central purpose in the composition classroom. Rhetorical reading pedagogies seek to guide students in analyzing and evaluating rhetorical choices and genre conventions, often through self (LeVan and King, 2017) and peer review (Bunn, 2013; Mendenhall and Johnson, 2010) and through the study of published texts (Adler-Kassner and Estrem, 2007; Bunn, 2013; Foster, 1997; Keller, 2013; Sweeney and McBride, 2015). While students might benefit from reading models with little guidance (Charney and Carlson, 1995), reading for
rhetoric is often taught as an active reading strategy. For example, Mike Bunn (2011) author of a text my university writing program requires new instructors to assign, promotes actively “reading like a writer,” a process through which students identify an author’s writerly choices, generate alternatives, and evaluate those options for integration in their own writing.

Reading for Ideas

Reading for ideas also occupies a central place in reading in composition pedagogies. In reading-to-write assignments like research papers and literary analyses, students are asked to analyze and evaluate the ideas of one or more source texts (Adler-Kassner and Estrem, 2007; Keller, 2013). Reading scholar Louise Rosenblatt (1988) classifies such purposes as taking an “efferent stance” to emphasize what students “carry away from the text” (p. 5). I use the phrase reading for ideas to distinguish this purpose of reading from the term comprehension, which historically has been associated with students’ perceived proficiency in “correctly” reading a text. While early compositionists fretted about students’ reading comprehension skills (J. I. Brown, 1953; Hutchinson, 1955), current scholarship on writing beyond the basic and developmental classrooms has shifted focus from the cognitive reading strategies students may or may not have mastered to call attention to how students use information and ideas from the texts they read in their own writing (Jamieson, 2017; Mendenhall and Johnson, 2010).

Critical Reading

Less common recently are references to critical reading, a term compositionists now sometimes use to refer to a “consciousness of power relations” also essential to critical reading (Shor, 1999), but that has also been used to refer to general critical thinking skills (Haas and Flower, 1988; Horning, 1987, 2011; Jolliffe, 2007; Petrosky, 1982; Recchio, 1991). In the former sense, critical reading analyzes and evaluates the values and beliefs within and around a text, and the critical reader must analyze and evaluate their own beliefs in the process of reading. The latter sense emphasizes cognitive processes of analyzing, inferring, evaluating, and synthesizing. While in both views critical reading depends on analyzing and evaluating reader-writer interactions (Stoecker, Schmidbauer, Mullin, and Young, 1993), I use critical reading to refer to the theories which align with critical pedagogies and emphasize the readers’ and/or writers’ cultural values within their sociopolitical contexts, and to distinguish this way of reading from general critical thinking skills which still support reading for ideas.
Aesthetic Reading

Borrowing from Rosenblatt’s concept of aesthetic reading, scholars at times acknowledge a reader’s aesthetic experience in response to a text. Sullivan et al. (2017) hope students experience “reading for pleasure” (p. xx) and Blau (2017) goes as far as recommending a reintegration of literature in the writing classroom in recognition of the “value of pleasure and joy in fostering learning” (p. 278). Sullivan et al. (2017) note declining attention to aesthetic reading since the 1980s has been furthered by the introduction of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and a growing emphasis on high-stakes testing.

Jolliffe (2003) offers a caveat more typical in composition studies by acknowledging “the importance of forging some kind of special, private connection to a text” which must be balanced “with the vitality that comes from scrutinizing and interrogating a text’s central ideas as they are played out in various public forums” (p. 137). In his subsequent argument, Jolliffe’s attention to strategies for developing “dispassionate imperturbability” that goes “beyond [students’] personal feelings, opinions and observations” reveals an assumption that students do not need encouragement to read aesthetically and suggests elementary students have already been taught this way of reading. Such qualified treatment is most typical in current composition scholarship that rarely invokes aesthetic reading.

Purposeful Readings

Students apply these ways of reading as focal lenses which color and shape attention to text. However, the expansion of reading purposes has made it difficult to design effective reading instruction which addresses our complicated expectations for what it means to read well in FYC. The wide range of reading purposes proliferating contemporary composition scholarship results in a “vertical ‘piling up’ of multiple forms of reading” (Keller, 2014) and the necessity of “(re)situate[ing] ourselves” in response to these accumulated purposes (p. 6). Indeed, some pedagogies acknowledge students should and do read for more than one purpose in the composition course. Carillo (2015) teaches students to recognize the demands of different ways of reading and to make deliberate shifts through a “mindful reading framework” (p. 112). Salvatori and Donahue (2017) concept of “unruly reading” proposes a similar idea—that readers employ reading for different uses and the most sophisticated readers are those who do so intentionally. Thus, a common pedagogical response to the proliferation of reading purposes has been to develop students’ metacognitive awareness of various ways of reading by first making reading practices visible to the students themselves (Carillo, 2015).
Making Reading Visible

This study adds to the existing scholarship on educational technology used to increase the visibility of students’ reading practices for instructors. In the 1980s, programmers began to create software which allowed networked readers to share digital documents and annotations (J. S. Brown, 1985; Yankelovich, Meyrowitz, and Dam, 1985). Soon, composition scholars were designing and using HTML annotation and discussion tools in the classrooms (Daniel Anderson, 1998; David Anderson and Chevalier, 1997; Johnson-Eilola, 1992; Schwartz, 1989). Scholars celebrated the hypertext potentials for collaboration (Guyer, Seward, and Green, 1994; Schwartz, 1989), intertextual reading (Schwartz, 1989), conversation between readers and writers (J. S. Brown, 1985; Johnson-Eilola, 1992; Schwartz, 1989), thinking about the relationship between reading and writing (Johnson-Eilola, 1992), and linking in-class and out-of-class discussions (David Anderson and Chevalier, 1997).

Recent developments in social annotation tools allow instructors and students to share the margins of the text for broader and more frequent study of student reading (e.g. Cornis-Pope and Woodlief, 2003; Johnson, Archibald, and Tenenbaum, 2010; Wolfe, 2002, 2008). Like reflective writing and journaling methods, social annotation allows instructors to observe the reading practices of students, several or a whole-class at a time, and at multiple points in the term. Because text annotations are written during the reading event, they also offer a more immediate view of reading not possible with post-reading reflections.Annotations allow students to document their reading processes in the moment rather than forcing them to rely on memory.

The shared margins may also afford student improvement in reading comprehension, general critical thinking skills, and metacognition. Cornis-Pope and Woodlief’s (2003) semester-long study of digital annotation in a literature course finds students benefit from rereading and comparing their own annotations to those written by peers; they find students begin to take on roles of readers active in the meaning-making negotiations. Johnson et al. (2010) also highlight the importance of the social aspects in promoting reading comprehension and metacognition.

The purpose of the present study is to describe the ways students read in FYC to identify areas where student practices align with the several purposes for reading and gaps which might be addressed in composition pedagogies. Where previous research in social annotation has focused on how the technology might be used to improve comprehension, to develop general critical thinking, or advance students’ metacognition, I expand the view to consider the many purposes for reading in FYC. Using a record of social annotations that spans a full semester of reading tasks, I consider the following questions:
To what extent do students take up the various reading lenses—for ideas, rhetorical reading, critical reading, and aesthetic reading—that scholars have described?

To what extent do students vary their practices in response to texts assigned for different purposes?

To what extent do students simultaneously read for ideas, rhetorically, critically, and aesthetically?

Methodology

I locate my study in my own classroom, an FYC course at a large Midwestern university. My curriculum, adapted from one of three syllabi suggested by the department, centers on 4 major units: literacy narrative, rhetorical analysis, research-based argument, and revised/repurposed argument. For each unit, my students read related texts and produced an argument in the assigned genre. Early in the semester, I assigned Bunn’s (2011) “How to Read Like a Writer” to encourage students to read subsequent texts through a rhetorical reading lens.

Hypothesis activity for the query user

Transcript of "The danger of a single story" -11
https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript

3/29/2017 1:13:24 PM #

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.

I really like this paragraph, and I think it creates a call-for-action at the end of her talk. She is telling her listeners to create stories that unite people rather than separate them. I think in this case, it's possible to rewrite history in a way and to become more accepting, tolerant, and respectful of people from all around the world, and to recognize the vast complexities that lie within every individual.

3/29/2017 1:09:41 PM #

But to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me.

This line resonated with me because this is the main problem with following a single story. Refusing to acknowledge the positive stories and only focusing on the horrible ones is dehumanizing and wrong. We are more than our experiences, and to suggest that we have to be defined by our experience is outrageous. The author refuses to be

Figure 1. Sample annotations from a single student (username redacted). The title and URL of the annotated text is located at the top next to the total number of annotations made by the student in this text.
In accordance with standard ethical practice, I applied for and received IRB approval to study annotations made by students in my FYC course. Thirteen of 18 enrolled students consented to participate. I archived 1,266 annotations from Hypothesis, a digital, social annotation tool, in HTML files separated by student and assigned text. The HTML files include the student’s username, student-selected excerpts from assigned texts, student annotations for each excerpt, and the time and date of annotation (see Figure 1). Each HTML file displays annotations in reverse chronological order.

Using focused coding (Charmaz, 2006), I created several codes to label the reading lenses students applied in annotations (see Table 1). These codes reflect the four major ways of reading in composition scholarship: reading for ideas, rhetorical reading, critical reading, and aesthetic reading.

Table 1. Reading Focal Lenses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Focal lens</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading for ideas</td>
<td>argument, main idea, key details</td>
<td>“This shows author’s understanding of criticism, which is always built on the previous ones and being restated. Therefore the author thinks it is not personal.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical reading</td>
<td>writerly strategies and rhetorical situation</td>
<td>“The author uses ethos in this section when describing the people she is citing. By giving the people she is citing credibility, she in turn gives her evidence credibility, which makes her argument stronger.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical reading</td>
<td>values and beliefs within sociopolitical contexts</td>
<td>“The author is acknowledging the unfortunate acceptance of the mass diminishing of the arts. Careers in science and medicine have been so ingrained into every family that those who dare to stray do so with an understanding that they will never be respected, never be properly compensated for their work.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetic reading</td>
<td>emotional and personal</td>
<td>“This ted talk was very powerful to me… I enjoy that a lot and feel that even if you are not a writer, you have to enjoy the pursuit of telling and hearing stories, and why stories matter.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When annotations could not be classified by a single lens of focus, I applied two or more ways of reading codes.

Visible Reading Lenses

Coded student annotations reveal several patterns in reading lenses that reflect the instructional purposes of the assigned readings. Reading for ideas
annotations accounted for the greatest proportion across both instructional texts, assigned to introduce students to reading and writing strategies, and model texts, assigned to introduce writing genres (see Table 2). Reading for rhetoric annotations were almost as common as reading for ideas. Most often, students identified and sometimes evaluated a writerly strategy used within a text, as Brock does in his note: “It is interesting how the author recognizes what he is doing throughout the text by using this third person style.” Together, these reading lenses align with the two broad purposes for reading emphasized in much contemporary composition scholarship.

Table 2. Visible Ways of Reading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Focus</th>
<th>Ideas</th>
<th>Rhetorical</th>
<th>Critical</th>
<th>Aesthetic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructional (n=921)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>659</td>
<td>621</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Instructional</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model (n=345)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Model</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n=1266)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>904</td>
<td>890</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Reading percentages across each text type total more than 100% because some annotations demonstrate more than one way of reading.

While Rosenblatt (1969, 1988) pays considerable attention to aesthetic reading in her work, compositionists, with few exceptions, have not emphasized this way of reading. In this dataset, student annotations reflect aesthetic reading in only 4% of the annotations. Critical reading constituted a lower proportion of annotations. My own lack of emphasis on aesthetic reading, which corresponds to a similar neglect in secondary and post-secondary pedagogies, and critical reading in my explicit instructional goals may explain these low proportions.

The type of texts assigned also influence the ways of reading made visible in student annotations even though students were not asked to annotate the texts differently. Instructional texts and model texts had equal percentages of reading for ideas annotations. Through the annotations, students read strategically to summarize the main ideas and details of the instructions and to connect the strategies to students’ reading and writing coursework. How-
ever, rhetorical reading annotations, which I emphasized in my assignment instructions and feedback, were most likely to be made in model texts. While I purposefully assigned model texts to represent more diverse racial, national, and gendered experiences, I did not seek the same diversity in instructional texts. Many of the instructional texts describing how students should engage in reading and writing practices were written from the perspectives of white, American scholars; I missed an opportunity for students to practice a critical reading of academia. These findings affirm the importance of aligning selected texts and reading purposes so that students practice applying the ways of reading lenses intended. They also show instructors can use social annotations to assess the extent to which students take up ways of reading taught in class, allowing for more responsive feedback and instruction.

**Overlapping Ways of Reading**

In the majority of annotations more than one way of reading was visible. Students frequently annotated by layering rhetorical reading with other ways of reading, most often with reading for ideas (see Figure 2). These layers created more complex readings that reflected my instructional goals. I see this complexity in Megan’s annotation which focuses on the intersections of reading for ideas and rhetoric:

> With this sentence, I believe that the author will continue to discuss “quick analysis” in terms of analytical reading. She points out that our initial judgments of the people we encounter every day mean that we are analyzing everywhere we go. This is a clever way to lead into her paper, as she has made a real-world connection for the reader and seamlessly begins to introduce her main topic with this one phrase.

Megan reads for ideas by predicting the author’s next move and summarizing the argument; she evaluates the writer’s introduction through “a real-world connection” in terms of what those writerly strategies facilitate in her own readerly work. Reading to connect the reader’s and writer’s strategies may also transfer to her own work as a writer, one of my major purposes for assigning reading in the composition course.

The data suggest that students’ ways of reading often overlap in a single annotation in ways that do reflect an accumulation of reading purposes in my composition course, much like the accumulation of expectations Keller (2014) describes. In these instances of overlap, the complex student readings are most likely to align with instructor goals for integrating reading in FYC.
Figure 2. The relative sizes of the ways of reading lenses approximate the proportion of each way of reading in the data set. The areas of overlap represent annotations which made visible more than one way of reading.

Re-Seeing the Relationships Among Ways of Reading

In my FYC course, students primarily read for ideas and rhetoric—lenses of reading which aligned with my department’s goals and the instructional and model texts across the genres assigned. Students layered ways of reading lenses atop one another, writing annotations that often combined reading for ideas and rhetoric, and sometimes critical and aesthetic reading as well. This layering suggests that as the goals for reading in composition have shifted, we have not left behind any way of reading. Instead, as we ask our students to shift purposes, they may read with greater attention to one lens even as they continue to read through other lenses. Good, complex reading attends to multiple lenses simultaneously and takes into account writerly choices and their effects on readers in terms of meaning negotiation and reading experience. While reading well in composition may mean applying a rhetorical
reading lens, that way of reading becomes more complex when combined with attention to ideas, critical and aesthetic reading as we saw in the contrasts between Megan’s layered annotations and Brock’s single-lens annotations. As we continue to make claims related to good reading practices in FYC, social annotation technologies can make visible to research and instructors the ways in which students apply the reading lenses we promote.

**Implications for Future Practice**

It is not enough to assign readings in FYC, but we should also guide our students in focusing on the reading lenses which best align with our instructional goals and the text types assigned. The large proportion of rhetorical annotations my students made with coaching and feedback suggests that instructors can help students to become aware of and strategically focus the lenses through which they read texts. If we make digitally layering reading lenses an explicit purpose and provided targeted feedback on the practices made visible in students’ social annotations, as I did in my instructions for and feedback on reading for rhetoric, students may more frequently and effectively engage in this complex negotiation of meaning and experience.

The types of texts we assign also matter. We can strategically choose texts to encourage student attention to the ways of reading we wish to emphasize. The data suggest that students are most likely to layer multiple ways of reading with model texts. It may be that in model texts students are most likely to see the intersections of ideas, rhetoric, criticality and their own aesthetic response.

Social annotations provide a rich data set for learning about student reading; students themselves might be coached to reread their own annotations to see the lenses they apply and the extent to which they contextualize reading. Individual and collaborative study of social annotations could provide a shared source of data to enhance reflective writing assignments like difficulty papers (Salvatori and Donahue, 2012; Sweeney and McBride, 2015). Students might then use their reading made visible to read more strategically and with greater metacognitive awareness in composition with the goal of transferring learning from reading to writing. This study was limited to the products of students’ social annotations. Future research is needed to investigate how social annotation technologies and pedagogical choices interact to mediate students’ reading practices.

**References**


