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Reading With Purpose in the Writing Center

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Because most college writing assignments are accompanied by or draw on some type of reading, writing center tutors often find themselves supporting students' reading. In fact, despite the lack of scholarship and research on the role of reading in writing centers, G. Travis Adams has compellingly argued that writing centers are already reading-centered for this very reason. Similarly, W. Gary Griswold describes writing center tutors as working "on the 'front lines' with students who are struggling with college-level *reading* and writing" (60; emphasis added). Since tutors are being asked to engage in this work, why not give them tools to support a more comprehensive approach to literacy tutoring? With this goal in mind, I have developed preliminary recommendations for incorporating attention to reading in writing center sessions. I base these recommendations on composition, education, and psychology scholarship that suggests one of students' biggest obstacles to reading more deeply—and, therefore, writing better—is that they don't read with purpose (Horning, "Where;" Nilson; Jamieson; Perry). As background for these recommendations, I address the impetus for focusing on students' reading abilities.

STUDENTS' READING ABILITIES

Recent studies have indicated that many current college students' reading abilities are rather weak. The SAT Verbal/Critical Reading Portion, for example, has shown a steep decline over the last several decades in students' reading abilities. Despite criticisms of the test, its long history allows for comparisons over time, comparisons that reveal that "in 2015, the average score on the SAT verbal test was near historic lows" ("Performance," par. 2).

Data from studies conducted by composition researchers corroborate these quantitative findings. For example, The Citation Project, a multi-institutional, empirical research project that

studies students' source use in their research-based writing, found that students wrote from sentences not from sources, relying on paraphrasing, copying, and what Rebecca Moore Howard calls patchwriting. "The absence of summary," Howard et al., write, "coupled with the exclusive engagement of text on the sentence level, means that readers have no assurance that the students did read and understand" (186). In Sandra Jamieson and Howard's follow-up study of students' writing from sixteen U. S. colleges and universities, only 6% of students' citations were to summary. In addition to suggesting that students may not have understood the sources, their "sear[ch] for 'good sentences'" (Howard et al. 189) also suggests that students did not know why they were reading except to retrieve quotes to include in their writing.

Similarly, the first-year writing students at the University of Arkansas in David Jolliffe and Allison Harl's study of students' transition from high school to college were unsure of why they were expected to read in a writing class. Jolliffe and Harl concluded that while students were passionate about reading in their personal lives and read quite a lot, they did not complete reading assigned for their writing class largely because their instructors did not make clear what the reading had to do with their writing, the course's subject.

To motivate students to complete assigned readings, researchers (Jolliffe and Harl; Jamieson; Horning, "Where;" Bunn; Carillo) encourage writing faculty members across the disciplines to overtly connect the practices of reading and writing in their classrooms. Writing center tutors can support this work in many ways. Studies have shown, for example, that writing center tutors can "enhance students' motivation to learn by generating rapport and solidarity with them" (Mackiewicz and Thompson 39), a strategy that can also be employed when students lack the motivation to read. Tutors are also positioned well to explore with students why they may be disengaged from assigned readings and, therefore, not completing them. By asking strategic questions, tutors might discover that students find the readings too difficult or object to the subject discussed and/or to the author's stance. This information can be crucial to facilitating a session that addresses these obstacles in order to overcome them. While helping students overcome these challenges, tutors can also give students tools they need to articulate and remain cognizant of the purposes of their reading. In fact, reading for purpose is something that expert readers do quite naturally, but that less experienced readers rarely do. Tutors can help students

develop the habit of reading for purpose in the ways outlined in the remainder of this article.

READING WITH PURPOSE

Reading with purpose is a way of reading that emphasizes why one is reading. This approach allows the reader to read in thoughtful and deliberate ways to positively impact the related writing assignment. For example, some students who come to the writing center will need to read to write a summary of a reading; others will need to read to imitate an author's style; others still will need to read to synthesize several texts. This emphasis on purpose, described in more detail just below, responds to Jolliffe and Harl's as well as to Mike Bunn's findings that students are more motivated to read if that reading is overtly connected to a course's writing assignments. Tutors can motivate students to read and help them develop into better readers by focusing on why they are reading and—by extension—what they will do with that reading.

Linda Nilson's comparison between novice and expert readers lends some additional clarification. She points out that unlike "expert readers," students often don't read with a purpose. As experts read, they are "looking for something that's useful and important to [their] work. Students often tackle assigned readings with no purpose at all" (par. 6). Even if a student has, in fact, already completed the reading component of an assignment, her way of reading may not have been appropriate or sufficient to complete the related writing task. For example, students who have had success reading for content to write a summary are not likely to experience the same success if they are required to imitate a text's style, but read the original text only for content. Thus, the first step tutors can take to help students read with purpose is to:

1. *Ask students what the reading has to do with the written component of the assignment. Why are students being asked to read? What are they going to do with it?*

These related questions ask students to articulate connections between their reading and writing, and to begin to consider the best way to approach the assigned reading in terms of the writing assignment. Tutors can help students develop a repertoire of ways of reading that are connected to common writing assignments. For example, if completing assignments that ask for summary or memorization, students should be reading for content. Students should be reading for an author's techniques if they are expected to imitate it or describe the author's style. Students completing

synthesis assignments should be reading for connections among texts, and to complete personal response assignments students should be reading for personal connections. Tutors can help get students in the habit of asking themselves why they are reading and how the reading is related to the writing assignment. From there, students can choose the most productive way of reading based on the repertoire of ways of reading they have developed with support from tutors. The goal for tutors, then, is to help students recognize what these common assignments are asking for and which kinds of reading will help students complete the writing portion.

Tutors can also help students recognize the elements of a text that can provide insight into how to read. One way of doing this is by focusing on genre. According to Dana Driscoll's research, misunderstanding genre is fairly common, particularly among first-year writing students. She describes such lack of genre awareness as detrimental because of the "different assumptions that literary analysis and a rhetorical view of writing contain" ("Connected" par. 81). Whereas the tools of literary analysis are specific to interpreting and analyzing works of fiction, rhetoric is applicable across fields (Driscoll, "Connected" par. 81). Students who read a critical essay as though it is a story will, in effect, be applying an incongruous method of analysis since the tools of literary analysis are discipline-specific. Students will inevitably run into problems as they write about the piece since their reading practices ignored the text's genre. Thus, a second step tutors can take to help students read with purpose is to:

2. *Draw students' attention to genre as a guide for how to read.*

Tutors can intervene by drawing attention to the differences between reading literary and other texts. As David Jolliffe reminds us, students need help becoming "constructive, connective, active readers of *all the material* that comes their way—textbooks, reports, memoranda, and so on, as well as complicated, discursive essays" (Jolliffe 579, emphasis added). By helping students name the genre of the text, tutors can draw attention to how the type of text plays a role in how that text is read. Amy Devitt agrees that it is crucial for students to develop what she calls a "genre repertoire" throughout their experiences as readers and writers because it "serves as a resource for the writer when encountering an unfamiliar genre" (220). The same is true with reading— focusing on genre can provide important clues about how to read a text, clues that become part of that student's repertoire of reading knowledge.

Even the most basic introduction to genre theory can offer tutors the foundation they need to undertake this work. For example, Daniel Chandler describes genre as follows:

> Genres are not simply features of texts, but are mediating frameworks between texts, makers and interpreters. . . . Recognition of a text as belonging to a particular genre can help, for instance, to enable judgements to be made about... whether it is fictional or non-fictional. Assigning a text to a genre sets up initial expectations...[and] enables readers to generate feasible predictions about events in a narrative. Drawing on their knowledge of other texts within the same genre helps readers to sort salient from nonsalient narrative information in an individual text.

Tutors can illustrate the role of genre by using the example of the fairy-tale. A text that begins with "Once upon a time" lets readers know that it is likely a fairy-tale. From there, all of the prior knowledge of and experiences readers have with fairy tales kick in, and the readers will expect to see fairy tale elements: the prince and princess; the castle; perhaps a dragon or some other ominous creature; and a happily-ever-after ending. Tutors can use this example and others like it to help students become aware of how they can use genre more consciously to help determine how to read the texts they encounter.

Tutors might begin tutorials by talking to students about two major genres, namely literary genres and informational genres. Because of the Common Core State Standards' emphasis on "informational texts," many students will already be comfortable with this terminology. From there, tutors may discuss the range of genres that fall within each of these larger genres. Poetry, fiction, drama, and literary nonfiction, for example, fall under literary genres while expository and persuasive prose, for example, fall under informational genres. Tutors can help students recognize defining features of these genres, as well as how these features provide insight into effective ways of reading these texts. Even if a tutor goes no further than separating out the two major genres, this alone can provide a useful heuristic for supporting students' reading practices. After all, a student who reads a literary text for symbolism is not likely to have the same success if she reads an informational text that way. By providing this heuristic and by engaging students in discussions about genre with an eye not only toward writing but also toward reading, tutors can capitalize on the relationship between reading and writing.

These short, informal discussions about reading during tutorials

are crucial because they engage students in metacognitive work, the hinge upon which successful transfer of learning depends. Transfer of learning studies is an interdisciplinary field that uses research in educational and cognitive psychology to better understand instances in which "learning in one context or with one set of materials impacts on performance in another context or with other related materials" (Perkins and Salomon 3). Research has shown, though, that transfer is not automatic and, instead, needs to be fostered. Thus, a third step that tutors can take to help students read with purpose is to help them:

3. *Think beyond the immediate session.*
Transfer has the potential to occur when students recognize and generalize something in one context in such a way that they are able to call upon that information in a different context (Perkins and Salomon). Because transfer does not happen automatically, tutors need to create opportunities for students to think about their thinking. Asking students to engage in metacognitive work positions students to take their newly constructed knowledge with them to their courses and beyond academia. Steps #1 and #2 above, wherein tutors are prompting students to consider their purpose for reading and the genre of what they are reading, are intended to help students construct this transferrable knowledge that has applications far beyond a single tutorial.

TUTOR PREPARATION
If tutors are expected to engage in the work described above, they need to be prepared to do so. To this end, peer tutoring education courses can ask tutors to look at a series of writing assignments (real or mock) and discuss options for initiating a discussion with students about reading. Tutors can also brainstorm what they see as the purpose of the reading as it relates to the writing assignments. To prepare tutors to engage in discussions of genre and the transfer of learning, courses would also need to include some readings on transfer and genre research in writing centers (Driscoll, "Benefits;" Devet; Chandler). To help tutors understand how reading issues might masquerade as writing issues, tutors might also read Horning's aptly titled "The Trouble with Writing is the Trouble with Reading." With writing center studies scholars (Driscoll, "Benefits"; Hill; Stahr and Hahn) calling for transfer-focused peer education courses and many tutoring handbooks (Fitzgerald and Ianetta's *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors*; Rafoth's *A Tutor's Guide*; Gillespie and Lerner's *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring*) already including genre discussions (albeit from a writing standpoint), these important additions to peer

tutoring education courses may end up being more like tweaks than full-scale changes to already existing courses.

CONCLUSION

I encourage others to extend the work I have described here and to develop more targeted methods of supporting reading during tutorials. Part of this work will involve garnering a better sense of how reading is already attended to during tutorials, which can be accomplished through empirical and ethnographic studies, as well as other forms of research. Meanwhile, though, asking tutors to support students' reading while simultaneously working on their writing can be a powerful route toward improving students' reading and writing abilities, and ultimately a more comprehensive approach to literacy tutoring.

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