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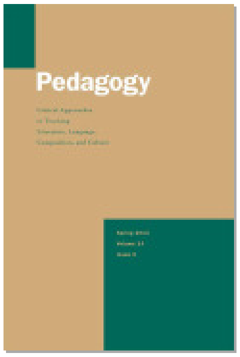

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Reading Value

Student Choice in Reading Strategies

Karen Manarin

Let me begin with some student attitudes toward reading that may surprise you. They arise in a particular context and institution, but they may indicate something much more pervasive in the undergraduate experience in North America. I teach at Mount Royal University, a public Canadian undergraduate university with roughly 12,000 students. As an English faculty member, I teach literature courses to English majors, but a big part of our role has always been to provide general education composition courses to students from all over the institution. In winter 2008, when revising the calendar description for a first-year general education course on critical writing and reading, we administered a survey to multiple sections of the course. The 120 participants responded much as we anticipated to questions about the calendar descriptions, but responses to questions about reading were unexpected. When we asked students to agree or disagree with such statements as "I am good at writing" or "In the area of writing, my confidence level is very high" on a 5-point Likert scale, 40 percent and 50 percent of students, respectively, gave themselves a 4 or 5, where 5 is strongly agree. This response is a little discouraging but not really surprising since the survey was administered in week 8 of the term and students had received a lot of feedback about their writing. However, 78 percent of students responded with a 4 or 5 to the statement "I am good at reading." Eighty percent responded with a 4 or 5 to the statement "In the area of reading, my confidence level is very high." Seventy-two per-

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cent claimed to like reading, and roughly 85 percent felt reading was relevant to their lives. They strongly identified value in reading.

Yet many faculty members, from different areas and institutions, identify student difficulty in reading as a major barrier to learning. They talk about a necessary "transition" to college reading and college reading expectations (Joliffe and Harl 2008). Faculty members complain that students can't or won't do the reading required for a course (Brost and Bradley 2006) and that they don't comprehend what they do read. Certainly, the responses on the survey didn't match my or my colleagues' experiences teaching this course. We have been frustrated by our perceptions that students don't read or, perhaps more accurately, don't read the way we want them to, concerns that aren't unique to this institutional context. Indeed, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa (2011: 18) frame their study about student achievement on the Collegiate Learning Assessment with dismal literacy statistics for college graduates and reveal that many students do not read very much and sometimes seek out courses with less rigorous reading and writing requirements (69–81). How can this apparent contradiction between student attitudes and student behavior be explained? Why would students indicate on our survey that they valued reading? How could students feel confident in reading if they couldn't understand? Did they know that they didn't understand? How could they not know? If they thought they read just fine, why would they try other ways of reading? Or maybe, I thought, they meant something altogether different by reading. Eventually, I had to consider what I meant by reading and what, as an English professor, I was or wasn't doing to help these students read.

This article is based on a research project undertaken in fall 2009; I asked students in two sections of a general education course on critical writing and reading how they read a variety of nonfictional texts in an effort to better understand what reading strategies students select when dealing with assigned texts. Before I discuss their choices in reading strategies, I explore some of my own assumptions around reading fostered by a disciplinary tradition of close reading of literary texts and a theoretical tradition of reader response. I then expand this discussion of reading to include educational research into reading strategies. I describe how this research affected my course design and the research project. Finally, I offer observations about which reading strategies seem most popular, regardless of efficacy, which elements of the course seem to foster student learning, and which obstacles remain.

As an English professor, I assume careful attention to detail and context is valuable when reading a text. I talk about close reading and consider the rhetorical effects of particular words and phrasing; I am, in some ways, a professional reader. Perhaps some of our frustration that "so many students don't seem to know how to really read a text" (Purves 1972: 55) can be traced back to these assumptions about reading. As Alan Purves notes, students "who read poems are not professionals. . . . They are not used to explaining all the processes by which they come to like or dislike, interpret, evaluate, or make some summative judgment about what they have read. There remains a question as to whether they need to or not" (55). After all, most students will not become professional readers; even among professional readers, the question of how to read and enter into a dialogue about what has been read is not easily answered, as various theoretical constructs of the reader demonstrate. For Wolfgang Iser (1978), "the concept of the implied reader designates a network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text" (34), but what happens when the actual reader does not grasp the text in the way invited? As Louise Rosenblatt ([1978] 1994) notes, "The reading of a text is an event occurring at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of the reader" (20). Shifting away from formalist explorations of the literariness of texts, Rosenblatt asks "What does the reader *do* in these different kinds of readings?" (23), a question that K–12 reading research has begun to explore.

Educational scholars such as Michael Pressley, Cathy Collins Block, Gerald G. Duffy, and Ellin Oliver Keene have much to offer us when we are thinking about the choices readers make during the reading process. The reading process consists of decisions that happen almost automatically for a proficient reader. It's only when we encounter difficulty that we are likely to become aware of different strategies we use to increase comprehension. A proficient reader is intentional about choosing the strategies that will produce the desired result (Pressley 2000). In "Research on Teaching Comprehension: Where We've Been and Where We're Going," Cathy Collins Block and Gerald G. Duffy (2008) summarize K–12 research into reading comprehension. They examine studies on forty-five strategies proposed from 1978 to 2000 before identifying nine strategies researched and validated to be highly successful since 2000: predict, monitor, question, image, fix it, infer, summarize, evaluate, synthesize. Their definitions are not always intuitive or exclusive. For example, "evaluate" and "synthesize" for Block and Duffy involve paying attention to how text is organized; predict, monitor, question and fix it involve activities of reading and rereading. Since reading involves multiple strategies in an iterative process (Block and Duffy 2008: 29), the boundaries between strategies can be, indeed, must be, fluid. Ellin Oliver Keene (2002) describes the characteristics of effective comprehension teaching as gleaned from in-depth interviews with classroom teachers and hundreds of classroom observations; she identifies many of the same reading strategies with slightly different nomenclature.

Using this research into reading strategies, I reframed a first-year general education course on critical writing and reading. As part of the course outline, I included the following description of reading strategies with reference to Block and Duffy's work:

- Predict — think about what a text is likely to say by looking at titles, sections, pictures, captions, tables.
- Monitor — recognize when you understand and activate different strategies to decode text.
- Question — formulate questions as you go.
- Image — create mental images to make connections.
- Fix it — recognize when you don't understand and reread or look back to decide how to create meaning.
- Infer — connect the ideas of the text to what you already know.
- Summarize — identify main ideas, leave out supporting details, draw conclusions.
- Evaluate — make judgments about the text based on what it says and what you already know.
- Synthesize — draw together different sources of information to create meaning.

The K–12 research provided a framework and a vocabulary that my students could use to describe their experiences. As part of the course, I talked about reading strategies and modeled how I read different texts. I did not focus on each strategy individually because that's not how people read. In focusing on reading, however, I did not want to let go of the metaphor of critical writing as an unending and vigorous conversation (Burke 1941), so one of the required texts was Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* (2006).

Using the trope of academic conversation and believing that writing improves reading comprehension (Graham and Hebert 2010), I assigned a reflective reading log. During the term, students wrote ten reflective entries, where they had to pick one of the week's essays, describe how they read it, and reflect on the choices they made. I used a three-part writing prompt for this assignment: repeat, relate, reflect. I wanted students to have the same task and prompt multiple times, not only so I could see if there was any change over the course, but also because they needed to see if there was any change.

As long as students wrote at least 250 words per log entry and demonstrated that they had engaged in some way with the reading, they received credit. I recognize the issue of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation, and while some students appeared to be attributing value to the reading logs in terms of learning, others wrote something down for the participation grade, as each reading log entry was worth 1 percent of the final grade, to a maximum of 10 percent. Overall, however, I was impressed with the thought and effort that seemed to go into the log entries and reading process even when they struggled with the texts and task. The logs were written in the last fifteen minutes of class once a week. I wanted to anchor our discussions in the classroom with the individual reading strategies often elided by the oral tradition of a class. The logs were interactive in that I would write a couple sentences about the strategies — sometimes suggesting other strategies, or describing how I read the text, or praising their choices — and return them to the students the next class. Among other assignments, the students also wrote two in-class rhetorical analyses, essentially meta-essays about essays they read and the choices authors make.

In this research project, I wanted to explore the reading strategies students choose. I gathered data from two sections of this course on critical writing and reading in fall 2009. One section of the course was a mixed cohort, though roughly one-third were nursing students; more than half of the students in the other section were computing science majors. The gender split in the two sections combined was very even: 46 percent women, 54 percent men. Forty-one of sixty students allowed me to consider their in-class work as part of this research project. Because all of this material was written for the course, the data are not anonymous, only confidential; I didn't know who had agreed to participate in the study until after the final grades were in. Although all students were invited to participate in interviews after the course was over, only two agreed.

Before I began analyzing the reflective reading logs and rhetorical analyses, I had to consider what reading strategies might look like in written artifacts. After all, as Robert Scholes notes (2002: 166), "We do not see reading"; whether in discussion or writing, all we have are oblique measures. Early on I decided that declarative statements in the reading logs were not enough; the details also had to suggest that a particular strategy was being attempted. So, for example, if the first sentence of a reading log claims that image and inference were used, I also look for further information about what types of images or inferences were made and what triggered these connections in the text before coding those categories. I also recognize that the terms

Table 1. Reading Strategy Categories

Code	Actions
Opinion	Arguing that a text is good or bad whether or not this opinion is backed up by more than subjective preference — not one of Block and Duffy's validated strategies
Process	Prereading and rereading: Predict — guessing what the text will be about Monitor — checking that comprehension is occurring during the reading Question — asking questions during the reading Fix it — rereading when comprehension has not occurred
Image	Focusing on imagery of text
Inference	Connecting to other experiences or knowledge
Structure	Examining how a text is organized: Summarize — identifying main points and supporting claims Evaluate — paying attention to narrative structure Synthesize — identifying how an informational text is organized
Difficulty	Responding to the topic rather than reflecting on strategies
Purpose	Selecting strategies based on how assignment would be graded

Block and Duffy use are not intuitive for many students, and so I am willing to rename strategies identified in the reading logs. By cross-referencing Block and Duffy with Keene and then returning to my students' responses, I am able to recognize not only where the K–12 research resonates in my context but also where it doesn't. For example, students describe how the type of reading varies based on how they will be graded — a crucial context for post-secondary students that is not often discussed in the K–12 literature.

When coding the data, I eventually collapsed strategies mentioned by Block and Duffy and Keene into five categories based on the action students took: opinion, process, image, inference, and structure (Table 1). I chose to collapse the categories because it was impossible to disaggregate some of the strategies based on the action the students reported. I added two more categories to capture other student responses: purpose and difficulty. Purpose was often present when students were reading for particular assignments, for example, rereading for rhetorical analyses or scanning for research papers. I assigned the code "difficulty" not when students reported that the reading was hard or when they were unable to comprehend, but when the students were unable, or perhaps unwilling, to reflect on the reading strategies they attempted.

Using these indicators, I was able to determine what seemed significant for students in my class. Throughout the reading logs, students reported overlapping strategies as they described how they read particular texts, and most were acutely aware of the benefits, and limitations, of their preferred strategies. The student quotations that follow are intended to represent multiple similar responses unless otherwise noted. As I worked through the data, I also kept track of frequency of strategies identified. Although it is tempting to track patterns of change in strategies chosen over the term, particular readings lent themselves to different strategies, and by the end of the course I was deliberately selecting readings that would force students away from some of their habitual choices.

These habitual choices include both image and inference, often in combination as I will explain. Many students use imagery to hold their attention and get them through the text. The first reading log about Heather Menzies's "When Roots Grow Back into the Earth" (2004) saw 89 percent of students reporting image as a strategy, and the essay does contain wonderful images. Using imagery as a strategy is often a conscious choice; commenting on Menzies's essay, one student wrote, "Personally I found this essay quite hard to read the first time I read it. I found it very draggy and hard to relate to. So I decided to reread the essay and use imagery to make the essay easier to read. . . . This is the technique I use most often when I'm having trouble reading through an essay" (Student A). Focusing on imagery allows the students to enjoy some of the reading experience even in the context where the reading is required. Imagery is also associated with identity in usually positive ways. As Student C explained, "I use these [images] quite often in everything I read because by nature I am a creative person." This link among imagery, identity, and creativity occurs many times in the reading logs; it also affects the type of inference displayed.

Occasionally students might relate an essay to another course, context, or concept, but by far the most common type of inference is to personal experience—72 percent for Menzies's essay. This essay about the importance of taking time to connect to place became an opportunity to talk about piano lessons, dance, night shifts, and gymnastics. Because I had asked students in the reading log prompt to relate the text to other knowledge or experiences, many students told the story of their lives in tangential relationship to the text: "As she described her cold, dirtied, bloodied hands, all I could envision in my head, was the sight of my blistered, throbbing, swollen hands that were covered in chalk dust, which had been caused by many hours of swinging along the parallel bars at my gymnastics club" (Student N). This student responded to a series of images in the text, even quoting details from the essay, by presenting her own image and explaining, quite eloquently in a long response, its significance for her as a former competitive gymnast. She finished the entry by trying to pull back to Menzies's essay: "Planting trees was Heather's way of feeling a sense of accomplishment, and although planting trees is a lot different than doing gymnastics, they can still affect two totally different people in the exact same way. So, in the end of these two very different stories came quite a few similarities" (Student N). Her reading is grounded in the details of Menzies's text, but what is it a reading of? Not Menzies's text, but the student's own — in a pattern we probably all recognize.

The pattern of response — detail from text, connect to self, return to generalization — is explicitly taught in the secondary school curriculum where I live. There is a gap between theory, where different reading strategies are identified and metacognition encouraged, and implementation, where a range of strategies is reduced to a "culture of response" (Alberta Education 2003). This focus on a reader's response, often tracing its origins to the work of Rosenblatt, is ubiquitous, as the title of a publication from the National Council of Teachers of English proclaims: *You Gotta BE the Book* (Wilhelm 2008). Scholes (2002: 166 – 67) places our failures to teach close reading in the context of "the death of the author, reader-response criticism, the self-deconstructing text, and the symptomatic readings of cultural studies, all of which, in various ways, undermine the notion of authorial intention as a feature of the reading process." Why, then, would we be surprised that students say that they are fine readers or assume that they would move beyond personal response to analysis? Why would Menzies's essay be about Menzies's rhetorical choices rather than individuals' creative responses?

The course was designed so that the later readings contain fewer images and are harder to relate to personal experience because I want students to experiment with other reading strategies; however, in the rhetorical analyses, especially the one on the final examination, many students returned to these strategies even though they are counterproductive for the assignment. Instead of a close reading exploring an author's rhetorical choices to persuade a reader, many students declare the essay's validity based on their own experience, another form of generalizing inference. For example, we have this from a male student: "In conclusion to John Updike's 'The Disposable Rocket,' I can agree and relate to most of his arguments" (Student O) or, from a woman, "Yes, there are more men out there who will seek the adrenaline rush that you get from things such as sky diving, but there are also women out there who seek the rush even more" (Student P). Neither perspective allows the students enough distance to create a rhetorical analysis. In the stressful situation of the final exam, many students fall back to the habitual pattern of image, inference, and generalization.

There is one important variant in this use pattern. Inference is in the top two categories in terms of frequency for every reading log except the one where students had to write about one of the scholarly articles they had selected as a source for the research paper. There, where I had hoped that students would infer using a schema built through the research process, only 30 percent of students reported connecting the reading to other knowledge, and half of those referred to personal experience rather than other texts or knowledge about the subject. For that particular log, 56 percent of students reported reading for a specific purpose, that is, scanning the article for a statistic or piece of information they could use in their papers. Only 35 percent of students described paying any attention to the structure of the article, despite class exercises on summarizing, distinguishing main point from details, and recognizing essay structure. Comprehending the overall argument of an article so as to put it in context with other articles and arguments just doesn't seem that important in reading for the research paper. While students are explicitly taught to connect text to personal experience, they are not necessarily taught to connect text to other texts or content knowledge, a type of synthesis many academics take for granted as part of reading.

Although neither the final exam nor research papers demonstrated what I had hoped, let me outline what seems to work and what obstacles remain. The reading logs help some students articulate strategies for dealing with difficult subject matter. Using imagery and connecting to personal experience, though powerful strategies for certain contexts, can create significant problems for comprehension when the texts challenge the student's sense of self. Such texts are perceived as more difficult, and some students struggle to focus on how they read rather than just respond to what they read. I often found myself coding as "opinion" claims about whether the text was right, at the same time as "difficulty." For the more controversial readings, up to 15 percent of students found it easier to offer an opinion about the value of the text based on their existing worldview than to reflect on the strategies they used to read the text. Even students who described strategies would often say whether they agreed or disagreed with the author, and if they agreed, they were more likely to describe multiple strategies: "I agreed with him so I wanted to understand where he was coming from to add the examples he used" (Student L). This student talks about three strategies in detail, including linking the text to other newspaper and magazine articles, a type of inference not often displayed in the reading logs.

Difficulty is not necessarily a bad thing; as Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori (2000: 81) notes, "'Moments of difficulty' often contain the seeds of understanding." The question is how to nurture this understanding in the face of defensiveness or aversion. Some students, reacting defensively, lashed out against the author instead of identifying strategies or engaging with the argument: "I find it hard to think someone who compares [us] to Nazis has anything beneficial to say. . . . [H]e can go back to the U.K. He obviously harbors extremely questionable feelings about this subject. Why?" (Student G). This student's response to an essay about Aboriginal mistreatment (Hume 2004) was echoed by several others who do not want to consider themselves complicit in racism. Some students recognized that their national or racial identities could make a text difficult to read because of the emotional impact: "The first time I read this essay, I found it difficult to get through it. My emotional response made it hard to fully take in the essay. I was too angry about the issues, and the way it made [us] look" (Student H). This student went on to write, "The more I read the essay, which is 3 times now, the more I got from the essay. The essay isn't just about how bad [we] are, but we aren't as culturally sensitive as we might think" (Student H). Rereading provided a way for this student to move past anger and begin to consider the details of the text. Another student wrote, "I hate the fact that it makes me feel personally responsible" but was able to accurately summarize the author's main claim because he was able to distance himself from the material (Student I). In a follow-up interview, Student I elaborated:

> When you first start reading, of course you get a little angry, so you need to realize that the thing he's talking about is true, and we did do some things, but it's not you personally. You have to realize that it was a different time and a different place. So you have to think about it through the eyes of a person back then, and then you can say, well, It's still horrible, but you have to look at it . . . keep yourself out of it basically. I wasn't there personally. I know even in that situation, I probably wouldn't have done it but I don't honestly know. It's kind of murky if you put yourself in there.

Consider the pronouns in this response, from the distancing and general "you," to a cautious acceptance of collective guilt "we did do some things," to oscillation between the distant "you" and the "I" disclaiming responsibility, but with the qualifiers "probably" and "I don't honestly know." Of course, distancing absolves the individual of responsibility and may reinforce a status quo of social or racial inequity, but it is also a first step toward confronting difficult issues in text, a first step, perhaps, toward "close reading."

Scholes (2002: 66), identifying “a failure to imagine the otherness of the text’s author,” argues that “what we actually mean by ‘close’ reading may be distant reading — reading as if the words belonged to a person at some distance from ourselves in thought or feeling. Perhaps they must be seen as the words of someone else before they can be seen as words at all — or, more particularly, as words that need to be read with close attention.” Students shared this insight. Like Student I, they explicitly identified strategies like summary as helpful because they helped them step away from the text. Some students seemed to recognize the problems that connecting with the text on a primarily personal level could bring: “When I try to read pieces of literature, I tend to try and make it relate to some instance in my life, and usually it does, but there are times when it doesn’t work. I’ve come to the conclusion that maybe I shouldn’t always try and relate it to my life because this is not always the case” (Student K). As Raymond Philippott and Michael F. Graves (2009) suggest, if students make only personal connections to the text, they risk not only superficial readings but also lack of persistence in texts that don’t relate to their lives. The reading logs helped some students think about their reading choices.

The reading logs also helped me identify areas of concern, many that I had never recognized before. I had never considered, for example, that the various strategies I group together under the category “process” could sometimes work against reading persistence. While many students talk about how predicting the text’s meaning from the title helps them understand, sometimes prediction works against comprehension if their expectations are violated. Having predicted, some students are reluctant to let go of that prediction, or as they see the text unfold differently, some become irritated at the author. For example, after expecting “a heartwarming essay about Canadian culture” (Student C) with Gary Genosko’s “Hockey and Culture” (2004), many students struggled to follow his criticisms of hockey as big business; an irritated Student C noted, “The biggest method I used was keeping my eyes open, which I didn’t succeed in.” The length, the critical tone, and the case-study structure were barriers for most students. Sometimes, the desire to understand and solve ambiguity slowed the reading process to a stop. As Student F explained in a follow-up interview, “The least useful [strategy] was fix it. If I wasn’t understanding it, I went back and kept asking my questions but I just found it interrupted the flow of my reading.” The oft-given advice to look up what you don’t know doesn’t work if too many terms and references are unknown, or if the context of the piece is unexpected, or if the conventions are being violated when the reader doesn't have a firm grasp on the conventions and schema.

The reading logs also helped me identify what students found particularly difficult about individual essays. I did not realize that analogies, traditionally a way to explain abstract material or to add humor and interest, get in the way of comprehension more often than we might suspect: "He used so many bizarre comparisons that I kept getting distracted from what he was trying to say. It wasn't until I stopped focusing on his analogies and started summarizing his claims that I finally understood what he was trying to say" (Student J); another student commented on a different essay: "A method I could have used was imagery, but since he uses these analogies to get his ideas across, it wouldn't have worked out because I wouldn't have got the right ideas flowing in my head" (Student L). Some students talked about how difficult they found reading a speech because of the voice markers in it; not surprisingly, the few students in the theater program had an easier time of it and talked about reading speeches as if they heard or were saying them. We know awareness of generic conventions is crucial for reading comprehension, but how often do we discuss the subgenres in our essay anthologies?

A number of students identified epiphanies during the course. I was surprised at how long it took for students to make some connections that I assumed were self-evident, such as that different types of texts need to be read differently or that rereading is a different experience than reading for the first time and involves other strategies. I was also surprised that, without prompting, some students singled out the reading logs as helpful in this and other contexts: "Doing these logs over the course of the semester has really given me insight into how I read. By now, understanding how I read, I think I will be able to more effectively read material for future school work" (Student J). I would draw attention to two features of this response: the focus on self-knowledge and self-efficacy and the insistence on the amount of time learning takes: "over the course of a semester" and "by now." If this student had described reading strategies once or twice, she might not have come to this insight. Focusing again on the iterative nature of the reading log, Student I noted, "After doing all these reading logs, I'm starting to see all the holes and key points of the text we read." This student is moving toward the position of critical reader, but it is a long, and not necessarily linear, process. Another student wrote, "The whole reading log experience is useful to people who think or would like to think about what/how they read. I found it easy to understand many essay topics after writing these logs. I think that happened because the logs allowed my mind to really think about the topic and writing style of the essay" (Student M). Writing about his own reading processes helped this student pay attention to how writers are trying to get him to read and how he can structure his own writing.

I do not know if these students continued thinking about, let alone writing about, their reading processes after this course was over. After all, motivation includes not only goal orientation but also attribution of value to topics and tasks. I suggest that students at the college level need explicit instruction in and practice with reading strategies, but they also need to recognize a benefit in using the strategies. If motivation to use the strategies is only extrinsic, for example, a reading log assigned by an instructor, transfer to a new context may not occur. If I teach them how to summarize in order to do summary assignments, are they likely to summarize readings for another class if they don't see a use value (an increase in comprehension or recall leading to better grades) associated with the activity? One student, when asked in a follow-up interview if her motivation for using different strategies was intrinsic or extrinsic, said:

> Well, I didn't know about the strategies until you told me about them. I'm sure I probably knew that I did some of those things sometimes when reading, but I didn't know about them until you told me. So in the beginning, it was extrinsic. But now I use them all the time. I think about them when I'm reading my textbooks. I'm one of the students who will read every single thing I'm supposed to read for all my classes, and I find it easier when I know kind of how to classify what type of reading I'm doing. I find it easier to understand. (Student F)

Positioning herself as the good student who reads what she is told to read, a self-identification based upon external validation, she also identified a learning orientation. She wanted to understand. Student F continued:

> First and foremost, I think I'm a better reader now, and I don't know what exactly made that happen, but I think I'm a much better reader now in terms of understanding content, and especially things I don't know anything about. I'm not as afraid to dive into it. So maybe now if I start reading a book I find totally boring, I won't find it boring anymore because I'll be more focused on the fact that I can get through that rough part and understand it.

For this student, comprehension led to confidence, persistence, and success. She had the ability to control her reading because she had conscious access to a repertoire of strategies she could use if she chose.

So what can we do to improve comprehension? We can talk about reading as a series of choices students can control. We can demonstrate the choices we make when struggling to understand instead of demonstrating the finished product of our readings. We can provide feedback on reading. We can consider the different types of texts and types of reading that our students, even English majors, have to do and the different types of reading that we do. We can assign different types of texts. When we assign texts, we can resist some students' desire to rely on the oral tradition of the class. Why should they struggle with reading difficult material if we just tell them what it says anyway? As Brian D. Brost and Karen A. Bradley (2006) note, how we use required readings is one of the biggest factors in reading noncompliance. And we can ask our students to reflect on their reading strategies over a semester through a reflective reading log.

I do not pretend that the reading log removes the obstacles our students face. The texts students have to read are often unfamiliar to them. Even students who are proficient readers in other contexts may struggle with the readings in an introductory course because they don't have the background of terms, concepts, and names to help them sort through the meaning. And many of our students aren't proficient readers; if they learned specific reading strategies, it was probably in grade school, and most of the reading instruction has occurred in the language arts classroom with literary texts. As an English professor, I know that's a wonderful realm for reading that can encourage students "to acknowledge and appreciate complexity through (and beyond) literary texts" (Chick, Hassel, and Haynie 2009: 401), but sometimes they need to read differently, and we need to be able to recognize and articulate these differences. Arum and Roksa (2011: 95) note a correlation between heavier reading requirements and improved performance on the Collegiate Learning Assessment; however, I suspect that merely increasing the amount of reading is not enough to improve student learning. We need to pay attention to how students read.

Students in this first-year general education course seemed to be most comfortable when imagining or relating text back to their own experience. Although relating and imagining can be powerful strategies for certain types of texts, particularly those often taught in literature courses, they are not sufficient for other texts required in postsecondary courses. Greater awareness of reading strategies may enhance both teaching and learning. However, explicit instruction in reading strategies is not enough by itself. We cannot take for granted that students will use the strategies if they do not attribute value to them. Part of this attribution of value includes understanding how the limitations of particular strategies can affect performance. Building on what I have learned through this project, I have focused on inference with my students this past term. I ask them not only how and what they've read, but also why it matters and what they are going to do with that information. I ask them about the goals of assignments like research papers and the strategies that support those goals. I don't know if this focus will change the way they read; it has changed the way I teach.

Let me end with some statements about reading that won't surprise anyone. Politicians, educators, and cultural critics lament the decline of reading and the corresponding effects on society. *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*, a 2007 report by the National Endowment for the Arts, makes three alarming, but not unexpected, claims:

- Americans are spending less time reading.
- Reading comprehension skills are eroding.
- These declines have serious civic, social, cultural, and economic implications.

We've heard it all before, from an assortment of empirical studies like the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the National Survey of Student Engagement, from cultural critics such as Sven Birkerts (1994), from educational sociologists such as Arum and Roksa (2011), from our colleagues across disciplines. College participation, even graduation, does not seem to guarantee reading skill; the National Endowment for the Arts (2007) reports that reading proficiency of college graduates has declined at a 20–23 percent rate between 1992 and 2003. Even this comes as no surprise to college professors: 41 percent of faculty members surveyed by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* felt that students were not well prepared to read and understand difficult material; an additional 48 percent felt students were "somewhat" prepared (Sanoff 2006). How does this decline in reading matter, and how does this national, indeed, international, context intersect with this very local study?

What we are talking about is the ability of people to learn, the ability of people to sift through various forms of rhetoric, the ability of people to participate in a democracy. What we are also talking about is the possibility that we are partially complicit in this failure to learn, if not by action then by omission. We need to recognize that if indeed reading comprehension skills are eroding, we need to do something about it, even if we think students should know this material before they reach the postsecondary classroom, even if we are not trained in literacy instruction. The stakes are too great for us to do nothing. I have offered an example of local research on how students read in one course at one institution; I hope that, although the data are grounded in the specifics of this course and these students, the conclusions, or perhaps I should call them speculations and exhortations, may resonate with other instructors at other institutions.

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