



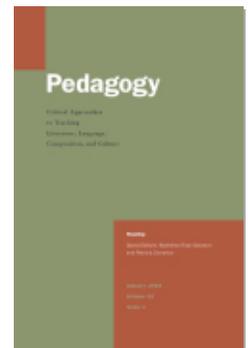
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Creating Mindful Readers in First-Year Composition Courses

A Strategy to Facilitate Transfer

Ellen C. Carillo

In the last several years, compositionists have become increasingly interested in how writing knowledge or writing skills transfer from one context to another. It seems that these compositionists are answering Gerald Nelms and Ronda Leathers Dively's call for making the "facilitat[ion] of the transfer of composition knowledge a priority of our discipline" (2007: 230). This article contributes to that goal but perhaps not in the way these scholars anticipated since its focus is on reading (not writing), and the transfer of reading knowledge specifically, wherein reading is defined as an act of composition in and of itself. The primary question it pursues is, how can we attend to reading in first-year composition in order to facilitate transfer and thereby effectively prepare students to read in other courses and contexts?

Scholarship on the Transfer of Learning

To begin to hypothesize the most productive ways to address the process of reading in first-year composition so as to prepare students to read effectively in other courses, I look to scholars within the fields of educational and cognitive psychology who have been studying how knowledge transfers within educational and other settings. For close to three decades David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon, two educational psychologists, have been studying transfer within the context of educational sites. In "Transfer of Learning" (1992:

n.p.), which provides an overview of the findings from their scholarship on transfer, Perkins and Salomon note that “the transfer of learning occurs when learning in one context or with one set of materials impacts on performance in another context or with other related materials.” King Beach, who takes a social-cultural approach, expands Perkins and Salomon’s notion of transfer to include not just individual, task-based applications from one context to the next but the social contexts that inform these experiences. Beach prefers the term *generalize* as opposed to *transfer* because it encompasses the more commonplace notion of transfer wherein an individual applies knowledge from one context to another but also emphasizes that individuals are always part of a larger social organization, as are the activities in which they are engaging. Generalizing for Beach, who considers sites of learning as well as other activities, is characterized by the “continuity and transformation of knowledge, skill, and identity across various forms of social organization” and is marked by “interrelated processes rather than a single general procedure” (1999: 112). Beach’s more dynamic understanding of transfer is useful to expose the different forces at play when a student moves from one context to another. Moreover, it reminds us not simply that it is the context that is changing but that the student and the relationship that the student has to the context are in flux. In other words, nothing about this process is static.

Although they work from different theoretical foundations, Perkins and Salomon and Beach agree that metacognition—literally thinking about thinking—is the hinge upon which transfer depends. Simply put, transfer has the potential to occur when students recognize and generalize something in one (perhaps a previous) course to allow for application in another course. Those acts of recognition and generalization are crucial, or transfer cannot occur. We might say that education depends on the concept of transfer as students are expected to apply what they learn in lower-level, introductory and often general education courses to their later, more advanced, field-specific courses.¹

A Hypothesis

That very brief overview of some scholarship on the transfer of learning must suffice so that I may go on and offer my hypothesis about teaching reading in first-year composition courses to help facilitate its transfer beyond those courses. I hypothesize that, to prepare students to read effectively in courses beyond first-year composition, we need to encourage the development of metacognitive practices through what I call *mindful reading*. Mindful reading is best understood not as yet another way of reading but as a framework

for teaching the range of ways of reading that are currently valued in our field so that students can create knowledge about reading and about themselves as readers, knowledge that they can bring with them into other courses.

I use the term *mindful* to underscore the metacognitive basis of this frame wherein students become knowledgeable, deliberate, and reflective about how they read and the demands that contexts place on their reading. Mindful reading is related to *mindfulness*, a term often associated with Buddhism and used frequently in the field of psychology. Shauna Shapiro describes mindfulness as “an abiding presence or awareness, a deep *knowing*” (2009: 556). Ellen Langer describes being mindful as the “simple act of drawing novel distinctions. It leads us to greater sensitivity to context and perspective. When we engage in mindful learning, we avoid forming mind-sets that unnecessarily limit us” (2000: 220). While my use of the term *mindful* draws on the definitions above, it has less in common with how compositionists interested in the relationships between spirituality and (the teaching of) writing have been using the term; I emphasize its metacognitive associations as opposed to its spiritual connotations.² For me, the term *mindful*, when modifying reading, describes a particular stance on the part of the reader, one that is characterized by intentional awareness of and attention to the present moment, its context, and one’s perspective.

The reader’s stance is crucial to my introduction of the term *mindful* into discussions about reading. While the various definitions of *metacognitive* and *mindful* often overlap, and *metacognitive* is already widely used, the concept of mindfulness highlights not just the task that one does mindfully but the individual, the reader, who is learning to *be* mindful. Mindfulness, unlike metacognition, is a way of being. One learns to be mindful, to adopt certain behaviors like those described by Langer. Thus, if we are interested in teaching to facilitate transfer, the term *mindful* opens up opportunities for talking about ways to cultivate mindful readers in first-year composition courses, students that will potentially remain mindful readers throughout their academic careers and beyond by creating knowledge about themselves as readers. Adapting Stephen M. North’s (1984) (not uncontroversial) statement, we might think about this in terms of producing mindful readers, not just mindful (or metacognitive) readings.

Certainly instructors need to teach students the approaches that will serve them well in their particular courses and immediate contexts. Still, I contend not only that composition instructors could explore multiple ways of reading in a single course but also that they *must* if they want their students to have the tools to read both widely and deeply in and beyond first-year

composition. This means that instructors would be responsible for exposing students to texts, as well as accompanying reading and writing assignments that make different demands on them. Asking students to consider, for example, what rhetorical reading enables (however an instructor defines and teaches that approach) compared with what a critical reading approach enables (again, however an instructor defines and teaches that approach) gives students access to multiple approaches. More important, it gives students the opportunity to develop knowledge about each approach individually, their relationship to that approach, and knowledge about that approach compared with another. This helps students develop the metacognitive skills useful for moving among reading approaches in deliberate and mindful ways.

I am calling for teaching students how to *learn* to read rather than arguing for a particular reading approach. This call is modeled on Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs's theory that, rather than teaching students "how to write," we should teach them "*how to learn*' to write" (2011: 21). One of the foundational arguments for their writing about writing pedagogy is that it fosters the transfer of learning by generalizing principles of writing rather than expecting students to develop mastery in one. Rather than thinking about which type of reading to teach in first-year composition, we would be wise to reframe the question altogether, following the lead of Wardle and Downs. They are interested in how they can help students construct knowledge about writing in order to prepare students to effectively use this knowledge to make determinations about their writing in various and future contexts. Similarly, mindful reading offers the framework for supporting students' construction of knowledge about reading.

I want to further develop this notion of mindful reading through a familiar example. Let's say a student in a first-year composition course is assigned Paulo Freire's "The 'Banking' Concept of Education," a chapter from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), as they sometimes are, particularly if *Ways of Reading* (2014) is the course's textbook. Let's think about how a student might "rhetorically read" the text, an approach often taught by first-year writing instructors. For rhetorical reading strategies we can look to those outlined in John C. Bean et al.'s *Reading Rhetorically* (2014), another widely used textbook in first-year writing courses. In chapter 1, the textbook includes the following list under the heading "Questions Rhetorical Readers Ask":

1. What questions does the text address, explicitly or implicitly?
2. Who is the intended audience?
3. How does the author support his or her thesis with reasons and evidence?

4. How does the author hook the intended reader's interest and keep the reader reading?
5. How does the author make himself or herself seem credible to the intended audience?
6. Are this writer's basic values, beliefs, and assumptions similar to or different from my own?
7. How do I respond to this text?
8. How do this author's evident purposes for writing fit with my purposes for reading? (10)

Using these questions as a guide, this student would be responsible for determining Freire's thesis and evidence for it, the questions he addresses, his intended audience, and so on. On the one hand, these seem like elements a student who is rhetorically reading might readily be able to point to. Rhetorically reading may help a student recognize that one of Freire's purposes is to expose and critique the common conception of the relationship between teachers and students wherein the former have all of the knowledge and the latter are simply the passive containers in which teachers will make deposits. Along the same lines, the student would likely be able to extrapolate Freire's values and beliefs and compare them with his or her own. Rhetorically reading may even allow the student to make connections between the two parts of Freire's chapter, namely, the first part about the teacher-student relationship and the second, more difficult part that provides the very abstract Marxist-driven foundation for his conception of critical pedagogy, as well as his critique of education as a system. But, at a certain point, rhetorical reading breaks down as an approach that no longer provides adequate access to the text's complexities, particularly those that arise in this second part of the chapter wherein Freire develops such concepts as "praxis" ([1970] 2014: 221), "consciousness as consciousness of consciousness" (221), "*intentionality* of consciousness" (224), "dialectical relations" (224), "cognitive actors" (221), and "humanization" (225), among others. I use these terms as indications of one of the text's complexities rather than simply terms that need to be defined. These complexities cannot be accessed and, therefore, deliberately worked with via rhetorical reading alone. In other words, it does not seem to me that reading rhetorically, as it is defined by the questions in Bean et al.'s list, would help students understand these difficult, abstract concepts. This exposes a few problems. First, if students are taught only one way of reading—say, rhetorical reading—then they do not have the tools to make sense of these ideas that are crucial to understanding Freire's chapter. Second, even if stu-

dents are taught multiple ways of reading, but without a metacognitive framework like mindful reading they are potentially unaware that a certain reading approach is failing them and that it is time to use a different approach. Thus, I am not arguing that the answer is to teach students as many ways of reading as we can fit into a semester, although I do think that the more approaches we can give them, the better we prepare them to work with unfamiliar discourses. Instead, we need to help students recognize at what moment in their reading process they need to relinquish a particular reading approach and use an alternative one, and why. Students need to be able to identify specific moments in complex texts when they need to shift reading approaches, and they need to have enough knowledge and practice with various approaches to make informed decisions about the approach they will abandon and that which they will use in its place.

Teaching rhetorical reading, particularly in the comprehensive way Bean et al.'s (2014) textbook does, is important at the very least because it tends to be more context driven than the narrower, more content-driven approaches to reading with which students are often more familiar. But while the list of questions posed in *Reading Rhetorically* does invite readers to consider their own context, assumptions, beliefs, and positionality, the questions never demand that readers reflect on or engage the approach itself and themselves as readers. And so, when students are frustrated by the elements of the text that remain inaccessible despite the eight questions the textbook provides, they may not be able to recognize that this is only one reading approach that happens to be failing them at that moment, and that they might more readily access the text using a different approach. Taught within a mindful reading framework, to read rhetorically is as much a deliberate decision as is the decision to abandon that approach and employ another in its place.

To more comprehensively explore how the concept of mindfulness becomes a useful way of thinking about reading and can lead to this important work on the part of the student, I quote the following passage from Langer:

Mindfulness is a flexible state of mind in which we are actively engaged in the present, noticing new things and sensitive to context. When we are in a state of mindlessness, we act like automatons that have been programmed to act according to the sense our behavior made in the past, rather than the present. Instead of actively drawing new distinctions, noticing new things, as we do when we are mindful, when we are mindless we rely on distinctions drawn in the past. We are stuck in a single,

rigid perspective, and we are oblivious to alternative ways of knowing. When we are mindless, our behavior is rule and routine governed; when we are mindful, rules and routines may guide our behavior rather than predetermine it. (2000: 220)

Teaching reading within the metacognitive framework I am calling for means sensitizing students to that particular context and encouraging them to reflect on the present moment, how far a reading approach takes them, what aspects of the text it allows them to address, and what meanings it enables and prohibits. Rather than reading “mindlessly” or perhaps relying on their default or rigid way of reading other texts, students benefit from the flexibility that mindful reading offers in that it compels them to actively draw on a repertoire of reading approaches they have been cultivating in first-year composition. Students can represent and reflect on their reading processes and their movement among reading approaches through various assignments, one of which is detailed in the conclusion to this piece.

Is Reading a Generalizable Skill?

My hypothesis may, in fact, raise some criticism because it depends upon the notion that reading is a generalizable skill. Characterizing writing as a generalizable skill has long been contested in composition studies, particularly by scholars studying discourse communities. These scholars contend that social context heavily influences and governs one’s writing. They focus on the local conventions of these contexts rather than considering similarities that may exist across contexts. The mindful reading framework does not deny that reading, like writing, is bound to communities of social practice and particular contexts. In fact, teaching reading within this framework emphasizes this point since instructors are responsible for helping students recognize, understand, and anticipate their relationship to reading in a range of contexts and how that relationship changes depending on whether the context is an English or biology class. Notice that this framework does not make first-year composition instructors responsible for recreating those communities of social practice (i.e., various disciplines), since to do so, in David Russell’s words, would be “overambitious” (1995: 51). Instead, first-year composition becomes about preparing students to productively engage with texts in a range of disciplines. Although Russell rightly maintains that students must actually participate in any given discipline to truly learn and understand that particular context and its associated conventions, this does not mean that first-year writing instructors cannot foster an *awareness* of those contexts and conventions and give students opportunities to experiment with and reflect

on which reading practices work most productively in various contexts. As noted above, transfer-of-learning scholarship indicates that this awareness needs to be fostered, and is most successfully fostered, within a metacognitive framework. This is where Beach's discussion of generalizing is particularly useful, because he underscores the "changing relations between individuals and social activities" (1999: 113) rather than seeing transfer as a direct, one-way application of learning or knowledge from one context to another. Drawing on this more dynamic understanding of transfer, mindful reading compels students to imagine a reciprocal relationship between themselves and any given context within which they read and compels them to reflect on that relationship. In other words, within this mindful reading framework students are given opportunities to reflect not only on the changing contexts they encounter as they make their way through the curriculum but also how these contexts constantly change and (re)position them as readers.

While context should not be ignored, and is not ignored within a mindful reading framework, it is my contention, following scholars such as Julie Foertsch, that the dichotomy between local (i.e., context-bound) and general knowledge is often misleading, if not overstated. Foertsch maintains not only that generalizable knowledge exists but also that it is, in fact, recognizable and useful, particularly as novices within disciplines develop into experts. Foertsch points out that "both generic cognitive strategies [that emphasize similarities across contexts] . . . and socially situated strategies like those seen in writing-across-the-curriculum courses have had some share of success in the classroom—and some failures, too," which leads her to use research from cognitive psychology to argue that neither approach, alone, would be most effective: "A teaching approach that uses higher level abstractions and specific examples *in combination* will be more effective in promoting transfer of learning" (1995: 364). Foertsch explains further: "According to the latest evidence, general knowledge and specialized knowledge arise from the same pool of memories, the same set of learning experiences" (364), which potentially means that "the general principles of academic writing should be taught in conjunction with, not separate from, contextualized examples of how those principles may be applied" (377). This approach, which depends upon intertwining the construction of both generic and specific knowledge, may also be the most effective way of teaching reading. In fact, Perkins and Salomon note that "reading *is* a general cognitive skill which people routinely transfer to new subject matters, beginning to read in a domain with their general vocabulary and reading tactics and, as they go along, acquiring new domain-specific words, concepts, and reading tactics"

(1989: 21). Because reading is a general cognitive skill that also depends on domain-specific knowledge, Perkins and Salomon, like Foertsch, call for the “intimate intermingling of generality and context-specificity in instruction” (24). Thus, within the framework of mindful reading, students might have the opportunity to conduct a close reading, for example, as it is defined by English studies, and also to imagine the general principles of close reading that are transferable across seemingly different contexts.

The importance of this combination of general and context-bound knowledge is supported by Cynthia Shanahan et al.’s “Analysis of Expert Readers in Three Disciplines” (2011). These education scholars traced how (expert) readers from several distinct disciplines approach disciplinary-specific texts and found that these readers do rely on discipline-specific reading approaches but also share reading approaches that transcend their disciplines. After using think-aloud protocols to analyze the reading habits of professors in chemistry, history, and mathematics, Shanahan et al. found “many instances in which they engaged in similar strategies (sourcing, contextualization, corroboration, critiquing of the argument, use of text structure, paying attention to visual or graphical information and chemical and mathematical equations), but to varying degrees and in unique ways. They used these strategies differently and sometimes even for different purposes” (424). Shanahan et al. unfortunately emphasize the not particularly surprising differences that exist because of disciplinary-specific conventions, rather than the similarities they documented (which might help us to generalize from one discipline to another). Nonetheless, this exploratory research suggests that, although reading strategies may be used to “varying degrees and in unique ways” across disciplines, approaches used by expert readers in disciplines as varied as history and mathematics do in fact overlap. Particularly interesting for those of us in composition who may teach “close reading” is that

all of these experts demonstrated a “close” reading of the texts (i.e., they analyzed particular words, sentences, and paragraphs rather than merely reading for the gist), [but] it was only the mathematicians who overtly mentioned that this was a particular strategy that they used in reading. . . . By close reading, the mathematicians meant a reading that thoughtfully weighed the implications of nearly every word. One of the mathematicians, for example, said it usually took at least 4 or 5 hours to work his way through a single journal article for the first time. The other said that it sometimes took him years to work through a theorem so that he clearly understood it—a reason why the field does not place a high value on contemporaneousness. (421)

This description of the presence of close reading in the field of mathematics reminded me that I know woefully little about what and how mathematicians read. Still, the idea that mathematicians not only read in this way but also articulate “close reading” as a particular approach is exciting because it suggests the potential opportunity for transfer of reading knowledge from courses as radically different as first-year composition and mathematics. For while Shanahan et al. are not prepared to conclude “whether these strategies can be taught to students in any way that will effectively improve their academic performance” (424), the shared terminology itself necessarily creates a connection between the two fields and opportunity to teach for transfer across fields as seemingly disparate as composition and mathematics.

An Assignment That Supports the Mindful Reading Framework

By way of conclusion and as a means to lending specificity to the above discussion, I include a brief overview of an assignment I use to support this mindful reading framework. Because mindful reading depends upon students’ abilities to reflect on their reading practices, and the facilitation of the transfer of reading knowledge depends upon instructors’ abilities to work with students on their reading practices, the very act of reading must be made visible to both parties. In other words, students need to be able to represent their reading practices so that they become more mindful of them and so that instructors can support this work. This poses a challenge, though, as Robert Scholes has noted in this very journal:

We normally acknowledge, however grudgingly, that writing must be taught and continue to be taught from high school to college and perhaps beyond. We accept it, I believe, because we can see writing, and we know that much of the writing we see is not good enough. But we do not see reading. We see some writing about reading, to be sure, but we do not see reading. I am certain, though, that if we could see it, we would be appalled. (2002: 166)

If we are going to foreground the relationship between reading and writing in our first-year writing courses, we must find ways of making reading as visible as writing so we can work as deliberately on reading as we do on writing. The reading journals that I ask students to keep are used toward this goal as they help students identify, track, and reflect on their reading practices. As I introduce more formal names for our reading approaches, students are expected to use these to describe their reading experiences. Students’ journals become

artifacts of their mindful reading as their entries reflect their answers to the following questions about each text:

- Which reading approach will I employ first and why?
- How far does this reading approach take me?
- What does this reading approach allow me to notice in the text?
- What must I ignore?
- What meanings does this approach allow me to construct and what meanings does it prohibit?

Follow-up questions encourage students to develop knowledge about the reading strategies themselves and about their individual reading practices:

- At what point in the reading and why did I need to abandon my initial approach?
- Why did the initial approach take me only so far?
- What does this tell me about the approach, as well as about me as a reader?
- What other approaches do I need to bring into play in order to construct a meaning that achieves the goals associated with my reading/writing assignment?
- To what extent might this reading experience be useful as I read texts in my other courses?

These questions ask students to reflect on the potential and limits of each approach within the given context. These metacognitive questions shift attention toward more generalizable considerations surrounding how and why particular reading approaches function as they do and help students learn about themselves as readers. As students answer the general questions about the specific reading practices taught, they develop knowledge about the practices themselves and can begin to imagine how these practices might be used in multiple contexts, across disciplinary boundaries, and to different ends. Using reading journals to generalize in this way has the potential to facilitate “positive” transfer wherein “learning in one context enhances and improves a related performance in another context” (Perkins and Salomon 1992: n.p.). These reading journals compel students not just to become deliberate and active readers but to become deliberate and active constructors of knowledge about their reading practices, knowledge they can take with them beyond first-year composition.

Reading journals also gives instructors the means to explicitly teach

and support students' construction and transference of this knowledge, for as David Smit notes in the *End of Composition Studies* (2004), "If we want to promote the transfer of certain kinds of writing abilities from one class to another or one context to another, then we are going to have to find the means to institutionalize instruction in the similarities between the way writing is done in a variety of contexts" (119–20). We might say the same about reading.

Looking Back and Ahead

We can learn a great deal not only from this assignment but also from the scholars from the 1980s and early 1990s who studied and developed reading pedagogies, many of which depend upon metacognitive activities. While these scholars were not overtly interested in "transfer," their pedagogies remain recoverable and useful as we consider the transfer of reading knowledge. Assignments that emerged during this time that support the metacognitive framework I am describing include Ann E. Berthoff's (1988) and Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori and Patricia Donahue's (2005) double- and triple-entry notebook assignments, respectively, which encourage students to self-monitor as they read, as well as Salvatori's "difficulty paper" (Salvatori and Donahue 2005), which compels students to confront and reflect on the difficulties they encounter. What is promising about this contemporary moment that is characterized by a renewal of interest in reading pedagogies is that it has the potential to send scholars back to this earlier moment, which unfortunately remains terribly underrepresented in our field's anthologies, histories, and graduate courses. Moreover, it should also send scholars back to earlier issues of this very journal wherein attention to reading has remained largely consistent, despite the field's waning interest in the topic over the years. As noted above, Scholes's piece on reading was published in *Pedagogy*, and more recently, several articles on reading were published in *Pedagogy*'s 2011 and 2012 issues. These pieces include relevant, contemporary questions worth posing about reading, many of which dovetail with the question I pursue here. Moreover, the important work that Tara Lockhart and Mary Soliday describe in "The Critical Place of Reading in Writing Transfer (and Beyond): A Report of Student Experiences" in this issue serves as a model of how we can begin to assess the extent to which students transfer what they learn in lower-level composition courses into upper-level courses so that we can ultimately create pedagogies that promote a greater investment in learning. With a renewed interest in the place of reading in composition studies and a simultaneous investment in issues surrounding the transfer of learning, the time is ripe to begin creating these new peda-

gogies. Inquiring into how reading knowledge transfers beyond first-year composition is a first step.

Notes

1. Transfer-of-learning scholars have developed a range of distinctions among types of transfer, including high-road and low-road transfer, positive and negative transfer, near and far transfer, and forward-reaching and backward-reaching transfer. See Perkins and Salomon's scholarship (e.g., Perkins and Salomon 1989) for in-depth accounts of these distinctions.
2. For additional scholarship on the relationship between spirituality and literacy, see Fleckenstein 2003, Daniell 2003, and the *Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*, which regularly publishes articles on this relationship.

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