

How Students Read: Some Thoughts on Why This Matters

This article imagines that the world itself is a text, and to teach students to become critically literate in the classroom has important consequences beyond it. The author outlines two critical reading strategies that help prepare students to engage critically with the world around them.

W

hat to assign students to read in a literature course—or a writing course for that matter—is one of the core questions that faces those of us who teach English. The implementation of the Common Core State Standards has brought additional attention to this question by encouraging the use of more informational texts. This article, though, argues that English teachers would be wise to shift attention away from *what* texts to teach and toward teaching students *how* to interact with texts. As have teachers of “critical literacy” such as Paulo Freire, Ira Shor, and Henry A. Giroux, this article imagines that the world itself is a text, and to teach students to become critically literate—to actively and productively interact with texts in the classroom—has important consequences beyond it.¹

One of the most common ways that students interact with texts is by making personal connections to them. In fact, research has shown that students are most adept at making these types of connections—what are often called “text-to-self” connections—rather than “text-to-text” or “text-to-world” connections (Jolliffe and Harl 613; Manarin 287). Moreover, research also shows that students struggle to move beyond this way of reading (Manarin 294). Although the reading-to-relate approach has a role in critical literacy pedagogies, students’ reliance on this approach poses particular challenges for teachers who are looking to help students think beyond themselves. Perhaps the biggest problem with reading to relate is that the subject is always the reader. Writing within the context of

9/11, Robert Scholes explains that “we are not good, as a culture, at imagining the other” (167). When students read only to relate, they are missing opportunities to imagine “the other,” whatever “the other” means for that particular student. Moreover, reading to relate can lead to instances of misreading in which, as Scholes’s colleague Tamar Katz pointed out to him, “there is a difficulty in moving from the words of the text to some set of intentions that are different from one’s own, some values or presuppositions different from one’s own and possibly opposed to them” (qtd. in Scholes 166). This seemingly default method of reading—particularly when cast in this light—needs to be complemented—if not mitigated—by other ways of reading. Students need opportunities to develop reading practices “in which strength comes, paradoxically, from subordinating one’s own thoughts temporarily to the views and values of another person” (Scholes 167–68). The implications for society of seeing the value in deferring to others’ ideas were explored by John Dewey more than a century ago: “The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory” (101).

Drawing on Dewey’s and Scholes’s theories, this article assumes that reading to relate, as a way of reading, plays an important role in the classroom, particularly as an initial way for individuals—for students—to access and construct meaning from

texts. As noted above, within the context of critical literacy pedagogies, this is also an important way of revealing for students how they are affected by the world's power and class structures. Still, reading to relate is not sufficient for engaging the range of texts students encounter on a daily basis.

This article describes two critical reading practices that can enrich and expand how students interact with “texts,” broadly understood. Both reading practices draw students’ attention to questions that begin with “why” and “how”—inquiry-driven questions—rather than those that begin with “what,” content-driven questions. In doing so, they compel students to read actively, often in new ways and sometimes for the first time. Readers of this article are likely already familiar with these reading practices; they are certainly not new. Still, discussing these practices within the context of questions surrounding text selection illuminates the importance of focusing not just on what we require students to read but also how we ask them to read. Focusing on critical reading practices rather than just text selection gives instructors the opportunity to teach students *how* to critically engage the word and the world. A key element of this critical engagement is slowing down to deliberately engage texts. Although initially students lament the increased amount of time it takes them to complete the reading assignments, by the end of the semester students recognize the benefits of applying these active reading approaches. In an anonymous evaluation, one student noted, I “find myself reading more slowly in general, even when reading novels, as I realized how much depth some writing has and that it needs to be approached carefully and methodically.”

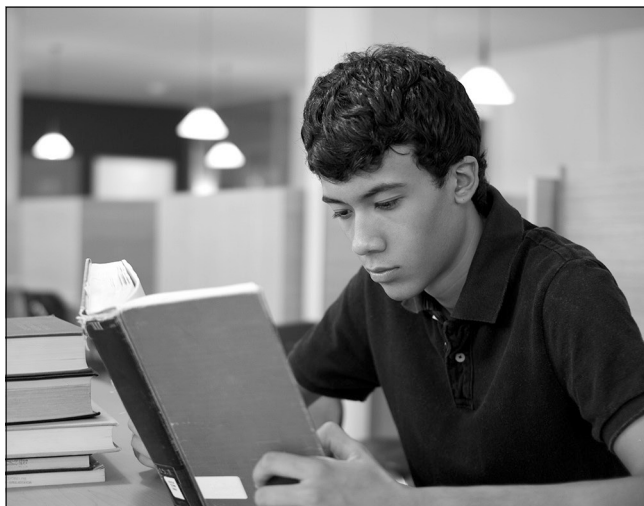
Descriptions of Two Critical Reading Practices

Critical literacy pedagogies do ask students to relate their own experiences to those described in texts. Still, this critical engagement also depends on moving beyond oneself to imagine oneself as part of a larger culture, and in relation to others, including “the other.” As Scholes notes above, though, imagining “the other” is difficult for students, and their default reading practice—reading to relate—doesn’t help. To give students opportunities to

both understand and experience the ideas of “the other”—arguably a first step toward helping them become empathetic and think beyond themselves—I ask students to engage in a version of Peter Elbow’s Doubting and Believing Game. This reading strategy encourages the reader to play two roles while reading. First, the reader reads a text as though she believes everything the writer says. Then, the reader rereads the text and takes on the role of the doubter. Reading to believe and reading to doubt necessitate that students read a text at least twice and be able to summarize what the author is saying. More importantly, though, this approach demands that students *inhabit* perspectives that are not their own. This “continual practice in trying to have other perceptions and experiences,” writes Elbow, “helps people break out of their ‘sets’ and preoccupations—helps them be less rigid, less prey to conventional, knee-jerk, or idiosyncratic responses” (170–71). Taking the time to “believe” “the other,” to inhabit “the other’s” position—and, perhaps most importantly, to ask how “the other” became “the other”—fosters an openness in students that has important consequences in the world.

The Doubting and Believing Game is also an important antidote for students who believe that critical reading is about criticizing, including the students who mistake complexity in a text for hypocrisy. This is not our students’ faults. In many cases, students have been given highly complex texts in English and other courses with no reading instruction whatsoever.² Students rely on what may have worked in the past—they try to find holes in every aspect of an author’s argument. Over the years, I have had many students call Virginia Woolf a hypocrite because in *A Room of One’s Own* she doesn’t follow through with her claim that she will come to no conclusions. Students point to many conclusions that Woolf, in fact, offers throughout *A Room of One’s Own*, including her most famous conclusion—that a woman needs money and a room of her own in order to write. Similarly, when I teach Sven Birkerts’s “MahVuhHuhPuh,” students call Birkerts a hypocrite because he critiques technology while simultaneously admitting his failure

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to completely separate himself from technological advances. In fact, I had one student whose essay on Birkerts's piece consisted of little more than a detailed list of the various contradictions she located in his writing. And, when I teach Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*, students repeatedly accuse Kincaid of contradicting herself since the "you" in her diatribe seems to shift. These students don't give authors and thinkers the benefit of the doubt. Instead, they *are* the doubters. And the Doubting and Believing Game can work equally as well for them because these students need practice believing. Part of believing in these cases involves recognizing that there is a difference between complexity and contradiction. If students are encouraged to take the time to slow down and believe, then they will have the opportunity to explore the complexities of such varied works, as well as *how* and *why*, in some cases, these writers are using contradiction as a rhetorical device.

Whether a student needs more practice doubting or believing, this way of reading helps students determine what they really think about a subject rather than what they assume they think or what they believe they should think. Moreover, in the course of applying this strategy, students often also find that their position on a subject does not necessarily lie on either side of a simplistic binary, but is the result of an act of negotiation. As English Professor Bruce McComiskey describes, negotiation, "a far more valuable reading strategy [than agreeing or disagreeing], requires us to establish

our own position in the middle ground among competing texts" (76). Unfortunately, as McComiskey also points out, negotiation "requires that students learn active reading strategies that most are simply unfamiliar with when they enter college" (75). Secondary-level teachers can offer students practice in the sort of active reading strategies that foster critical engagement so that students can arrive at college prepared to engage in this sophisticated critical work in and outside of the classroom.

The second active reading strategy intended to give students this important foundation is the Says/Does approach. Like the Doubting and Believing Game, this method also encourages rereading, demanding that students read to determine both what a text is saying and what it is doing. This method involves going paragraph by paragraph noting in the margins what each paragraph says—the content—and what each paragraph does—its rhetorical work or function. The "says" part, wherein students are expected to briefly summarize content, is the easier aspect of the equation, and it's the "does" part that really gets at what I want to work on with students. Shifting students' attention from summary to more rhetorically inflected issues allows them to recognize the role of each paragraph in the text, as well as how the paragraphs work together to help create meaning. Students are, in other words, reading for relevance—they are reading to understand how all of the pieces of the text relate to each other and to the text's subject. All of this is particularly helpful when it comes to long, dense texts wherein the function of each paragraph—the text's agenda, so to speak—is not readily visible. In fact, in an anonymous student evaluation, one of my former students found this approach particularly useful in an American Studies course when he was confronted with a complex text: "In American Studies, I decided to try the 'Says/Does' approach when reading the Dred Scott case proved difficult due to its word choice. Breaking it down paragraph by paragraph proved very useful. If I see another cryptic piece in further history classes, I would return to the method."

Although the Says/Does approach may not seem as readily applicable to "reading the world" as the Doubting and Believing Game, its emphasis on relevance and rhetoric is central to helping students critically read all that surrounds them. The Says/

Does Approach reminds students that no text—printed or otherwise—is ideologically neutral, and as students go paragraph by paragraph they begin to recognize how the text is working on them, how it is persuading them, how it is functioning, or—at least—how it is supposed to. Honing students’ abilities to recognize this rhetorical work helps prepare them to become informed, aware, and engaged citizens able to analyze, interpret, and evaluate the political, social, and economical world around them. Certainly, the Says/Does approach and the Doubting and Believing Game are not the only ways to enrich students’ reading practices and expand their ways of viewing the world. In fact, I firmly believe that the more ways we teach students to read, the better we prepare them to engage with a range of texts, including the world.

The Importance of Teaching Critical Reading within an Expansive Framework

Precisely how we introduce this focus on reading is important, particularly if one of the goals is for students to transfer their experiences with critical reading in the classroom beyond the classroom. Drawing on the work of education scholar Randi A. Engle, I would argue that we need to teach students about ways of reading within open, flexible, and far-reaching contexts, what Engle et al. describe as “expansive” contexts; they call narrower, mastery-driven contexts “bounded.” Engle and her colleagues have developed these terms to describe which contexts are most conducive to the transfer of learning, “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). Describing the difference between bounded and expansive contexts, Engle et al. offer the following examples: “A teacher can frame a lesson as a one-time event of learning . . . or as an initial discussion of an issue that students will be actively engaging with throughout their lives” (217). Their findings indicate that bounded frames “tend to discourage students from later using what they learn” while expansive frames “tend to encourage it” (217). Because students need to use what they learn about reading across the disciplines, in future academic contexts, and ideally even beyond academia, I have

developed an expansive frame in which to teach reading to foster transfer, a frame that challenges mastery-driven conceptions of reading. I call this expansive framework “mindful reading.” Mindful reading is not another type of reading that might appear on a list alongside rhetorical reading, for example, but a *framework* that contains the range of reading strategies that students might be taught such as the Says/Does Approach, the Doubting and Believing Game, but also other strategies such as rhetorical reading and reading like a writer. Within this framework, instructors choose, define, and teach the reading strategies that they imagine will be most useful to students.

I use the term *mindful* to underscore the meta-cognitive basis of this frame wherein students become *knowledgeable*, *deliberate*, and *reflective* about *how* they read and what different reading approaches allow and enable. Mindful reading is related to “mindfulness,” a concept often associated with Buddhism and used frequently in the field of psychology. The term *mindful*, when modifying reading, describes a particular stance on the part of the reader, one that is open, flexible, and characterized by intentional awareness of and attention to the present moment and the demands that it makes on reading. This intense awareness—the key to transfer—helps student-readers construct knowledge about (1) reading, (2) the reading strategies they are practicing on a range of texts, and (3) themselves as readers.


Each time students apply a reading strategy—like the Doubting and Believing Game or the Says/Does Approach—I ask them to reflect on that experience. To use Grant Wiggins’s language, I ask students to consider their experiences so they can practice “being flexible and adaptive with [their] repertoire” since this is “key to any future success.” Specifically, students consider what a particular way of reading enabled and prohibited, and they anticipate other contexts in which that approach might be particularly productive. Most students report using the strategies taught in my class in other academic settings. During a class discussion, for example, one student spoke of using the reading

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practices we discussed to better understand word problems in math class (math!). Another student anonymously noted that “learning how to pick apart the text has been by far the most helpful . . . it has made studying for Biology and Accounting much easier.” “Reading to relate” is not likely to be a useful strategy in courses like math, biology, and accounting. Whereas students previously may not have had alternative approaches to reading these texts, they do now. I also (and especially) encourage students to anticipate contexts beyond school in which these approaches might be useful, and some students do report using them outside of academia. For example, one student explained that she uses what she learned about synthesizing multiple sources to think about how the news is presented: “I watch both NBC and Fox to get different perspectives.” What this student seems to be describing is how she now reads these perspectives in relation to each other, recognizing that each has its own biases, an important way of reading her sources that she has transferred from her coursework to her viewing practices. Deborah-Lee Gollnitz and Alice Horning have explained the significance of this type of reading: “Reading is crucial to independent learning” as it is through reading that “consumers make connections of their own that are not swayed by another perspective” (63). In juxtaposing the different news outlets in the ways she does, this student is becoming that independent learner who will not simply accept what she hears or reads, but will deliberately consider and compare that information to other ideas and perspectives she encounters whether in or outside of the classroom. After all, as Wiggins points out, “transfer is the aim of any education . . . the point of school is not to get good at school but to effectively parlay what we learned in school in other learning and in life.” If instructors choose to work within bound rather than expansive contexts, they are not positioning their students to transfer what they have learned.

By way of conclusion, I want to return to where I began—to the issue of relatability. Reading to relate may, in fact, be one of the reading practices instructors wish to teach within the framework of mindful reading. And students should have the opportunity to reflect on that practice. Reading to relate can be a powerful aspect of critical reading pedagogies. As students read in this way, though,

they should be considering how far this method of interacting with the text takes them; what questions it allows them to pose; what questions it prohibits; and what it tells them about themselves as readers of texts and of the world. But students and instructors also need to be aware of the limits of any one reading approach, including—and perhaps especially reading to relate—if instructors are, in fact, looking to help students become empathetic, socially minded citizens.

No single approach will prepare students to engage productively with all kinds of texts and with the complex world that surrounds them. Moreover, reading to relate, particularly on its own, won’t help students become the informed, aware, and engaged citizens whom I think we are hoping to help form as we teach our students how to actively engage in the complex interpretive work that is expected of citizens in an information-rich culture. Shifting the focus away from text selection and toward reading practices can help students experience, reflect on, and come to value a range of reading practices that help foster open-mindedness, tolerance, and the critical acumen that is foundational to participating and learning in academic communities, as well as to partaking in meaningful public discourse and action beyond academic contexts. 

Notes

1. The term *reading*, like *text*, is used broadly in this article to encompass the interpretive work that goes on while interacting not just with alphabetic text and images but also with institutions and even less tangible entities that comprise our world.

2. Although students receive writing instruction throughout their college careers in the form of first-year composition, additional writing courses within and outside of their majors, as well as writing-intensive capstone seminar-style courses in their final year, direct reading instruction drops off in middle school at the latest.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Traditionally, teachers have encouraged students to engage with and interpret literature—novels, poems, short stories, and plays. Too often, however, the spoken word is left unanalyzed, even though the spoken word has the potential to alter our space just as much as the written. After gaining skill through analyzing a historic and contemporary speech as a class, students will select a famous speech from a list compiled from several resources and write an essay that identifies and explains the rhetorical strategies that the author deliberately chose while crafting the text to make an effective argument. Their analysis will consider questions such as, What makes the speech an argument? How did the author's rhetoric evoke a response from the audience? Why are the words still venerated today? <http://bit.ly/29NGaGz>