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Review Essay

WHO IS TEACHING COMPOSITION
STUDENTS TO READ AND
HOW ARE THEY DOING IT?


My students don’t read the way it says they will in the guide book.
Kathleen McCormick

A story in the electronic edition of the Chronicle of Higher Education on Wednesday, January 29, 2003, offers the following: “California State University officials on Tuesday released a report on remediation that shows that an increasing number of freshmen entering the university arrive prepared to do college-level work, but that first-year students’ levels of English proficiency have dropped and are falling short of system targets.” The article briefly mentions one outgrowth of this perceived shortfall in English proficiency: “California State and the University of California have jointly developed a program, which began about a year ago, to train English teachers of high-school juniors in ways to improve instruction in critical reading and reading comprehension” (Hebel).

Most people who study or teach college composition would respond, after a moment’s thought, “well, duh.” Walk the hallways of any English department or composition program and bring up the topic of students’ reading abilities, and then be prepared for an earful. It’s consensus: Students

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don’t come to college knowing how to read carefully and critically. They seem to think that reading consists of putting their eyes on the first word, moving them over each line, and then stopping when they reach the last word. They skim. They glance. They don’t connect.

Critical reading, I propose, is the bête noir of college composition. A great many studies of composition examine it in some way; the overwhelming majority of composition projects and assignments require it; a substantial litany of scholarship (e.g., Shaughnessy; Hull and Rose; Bartholomae; Bleich; Rose; Fishman and McCarthy; Sternglass; Scholes) attests to college students’ difficulties with reading and understanding texts of all kinds. Yet critical reading almost never takes center stage in composition studies. In the titles of the 574 concurrent sessions, workshops, and special-interest group meetings at the 2003 Conference on College Composition and Communication, for instance, the word reading appears only twice.

Why this paradox? Why do we have this animadversion in composition studies about our students’ difficulties with reading, yet the topic usually is almost off our radar screen? Is it because we assume that if our students are not capable of doing the kinds of critical reading required in college composition, then it’s someone else’s responsibility to teach them to do so? Is it because teaching critical reading is just part of what we do in college composition and we have to do so much else besides? Is it because we are not completely certain what roles critical reading does actually play in our courses?

In what follows, I take up these issues and address them as subsidiary to three larger questions that I hope interest composition scholars and teachers: Are our students being taught to read critically in high school? If so, how are they being taught to do so? Most importantly, what can we do in college composition to help our students develop the kinds of critical reading abilities that a college education demands? As part of this inquiry, I offer a review of two texts that are being used as the basis of in-service, professional development programs on reading for teachers in school districts throughout the United States, and I conjecture what these texts suggest we might do in college composition both to capitalize on their strengths and to remedy their shortcomings.

**The Roles of Critical Reading in College Composition**

Critical reading—that is, experiencing and interacting with texts and images in order to acquire information, analyze perspectives, generate questions, and interrogate one’s own knowledge and positions—is, of course, central to the teaching of college composition. I would imagine it well-nigh impossible to find any college writing course—even the most expressivist, most solely focused on the students’ personal writing—that doesn’t aim to teach critical reading in some way. Contrary to some views, there can be no such thing as a content-free composition course. Students must write about something, and they almost always end up reading something that they write about.

It is certainly not the case that critical reading is absent from the repertoire of instructional materials available to composition teachers. In fact, some characterization of critical reading exists as the governing analytic method in many of the anthologies of articles, essays, poems, and stories designed for use in composition courses. Take Andrea Lunsford and John Ruszkiewicz’s *The Presence of Others* as a representative example. Chapter 1 of this text, “On Thinking and Writing Critically,” teaches students to “become . . . more critical reader[s]” by previewing (determining a purpose for reading, examining titles and subtitles, inventory prior knowledge, skimming the reading, predicting what its main point will be), annotating (noting confusing places, key points, contentious statements, and sources), summarizing, analyzing (identifying evidence, assumptions, tone, and stance), rereading (“quickly to be sure you have understood the reading”), and responding (generating questions for the author, thinking about things you like best about the reading and things that you dislike, noting “what you have learned about effective writing from this reading”) (5-7).

These are excellent strategies, of course, and students will do better in college composition and in courses throughout the curriculum if they use them. I would add one more robust “move” to this repertoire, a strategy that might fall under Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz’s rubric of “responding”: After considering your personal response to a reading—i.e., what questions you have for the author, what you like or dislike about the reading, and so on—step back and take a passionate, disinterested look at the topic and its treatment in the reading. Ask yourself, “What do other people think about this topic? Do my responses and reactions resemble others? How so, or how not so? Why or why not? How does this topic figure in various forums of discussion—public, professional, academic, and so on?”

What I’m aiming for in teaching students this strategy goes under the name _ataraxia_, a kind of dispassionate imperturbability with roots in the 3rd-century B.C.E. skeptical philosophy, Pyrrhonism. Pyrrho taught that all knowledge claims were unjustifiable; since there exists no rational basis for choosing one judgment over another, the best course is simply to step back and make decisions according to custom and convention. (For a rich treatment of _ataraxia_ in the essay, see Hardison.) The motive for including this strategy in my critical reading pedagogy comes from my regular work as a writing-in-the-disciplines (and, therefore, reading-in-the-disciplines) consultant. Time and again, faculty members from a wide range of departments tell me
that students coming out of first-year composition courses seem capable of responding to readings only through a decidedly personalized, idiosyncratic lens. I don’t aim to teach my students the complete, unvarnished skepticism that the Pyrrhonists (and the Epicureans, as well) advocated. I simply want them to be able to ask, “What judgments can I make about this reading beyond my personal feelings, opinions, and observations?”

CRITICAL READING IN COLLEGE COMPOSITION: FOCUS? ATTITUDES?

Despite its ponderous presence in curriculums and materials, there seems to be no focused view of critical reading in college composition, perhaps because critical reading serves so many functions in writing courses. Its most common use, I’d say, is to provide students with a springboard for response. In this function, students read, for example, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” as a preliminary to writing a composition on the pros and cons of non-violent protest and civil disobedience. A slightly less visible, but still widely prevalent, use of critical reading is to give students fodder for synthesis. In this function, students read, for example, Dr. King’s “Letter,” plus Henry David Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” and Mahatma Gandhi’s “Letter to Lord Irwin” in order to write a composition comparing and contrasting the three writers’ views on non-violent protest and perhaps offering their own views on the issue as well. In some courses, these response-and-synthesis functions morph into the thematic focus for the entire composition course. The most famous (or infamous, depending on your politics) of these was “Writing About Difference,” developed in 1990 by the Freshman English Committee, chaired by Linda Brodkey, at the University of Texas at Austin, a course that brought charges from the higher educational right that Brodkey and her colleagues were not teaching students to write well but were instead trying to indoctrinate them with liberal political views. (For an interesting popular-press account of this controversy, see Fowler.) Curiously, the defense from Brodkey and her allies rested on a claim about critical reading pedagogy: The course was designed, they said, to teach students how to read a variety of documents, from both public and specialist forums, in order to study how ideas of difference were discursively constructed and to urge students to interrogate their own views and biases about difference. According to the concerns of the political right, the dean of arts and sciences at Texas “postponed” full-scale implementation of the course, apparently believing, along with Brodkey’s antagonists, that teaching assistants and adjuncts, who taught most of the composition courses at UT, were incapable of teaching students how to engage disinterested, open-minded critical reading and how to write clear, correct, managed prose at the same time. “It’s not a reading course, it’s a writing course,” went the critics’ complaint, as if somehow the two activities couldn’t occupy the same curricular space. (An update: A similar course on writing about race at the University of California at San Diego, where Brodkey now teaches, recently prompted the mother of a UCSD student to start a website called noindoctrination.org, which invites concerned parties to post messages about courses that allegedly contain one-sided political content [Katz].) Under the rubric of plus ca change, plus c’est le meme chose, note the recent, controversial article about the new, first-year writing program at Princeton, which features an array of instructor-designed, writing-intensive “topics” courses, in which students read, discuss, and write about the same subject matter for the entire semester (Bartlett). Letters to the editor in response to the article labeled the offerings as “boutique courses” (Gedeon) that “treat writing as a monolithic skill absorbed transparently” (Gunner).

While it’s difficult to establish consensus about the function of critical reading in college composition, most composition instructors nevertheless manifest strong attitudes about it. In general, I have found that these three attitudes prevail. The first might be labeled denial of responsibility. This attitude rests on two assumptions: first, that students know how to read critically before they come to college; and, second, that if students are not prepared to do the kinds of critical reading that a university education demands, then it’s someone else’s job besides the composition teacher’s to teach them. This attitude gets put into play in myriad “remedial” reading courses (generally bearing numbers lower than 100) one finds in the catalogs of most two-year colleges and some four-year schools. The second I might call, simply, blissful ignorance. A great many composition instructors quite frankly don’t know whether their students are able to read critically and have a rather difficult time finding out if they do. Not all colleges and universities test students’ reading abilities when they matriculate, and those institutions that do may use an assessment instrument that examines students’ simple comprehension abilities, not their facility with reading, interpreting, and critiquing. Moreover, in my years of teaching in at least four universities that do administer some kind of reading assessment to incoming first-year students, I have never received any kind of report of what these assessments say about my composition students. And, while every composition program in which I have taught or served as administrator has either mandated or required that instructors assign a “diagnostic” paper in the first week of the term to check students’ writing abilities and verify course placements, I have never worked in a program that suggested instructors do some kind of baseline assessment of students’ critical reading abilities. The third, and probably the most strident, attitude can simply be called consternation. This attitude is often manifest in water-cooler conversations about how students just don’t know how to read well, how the network TV/cable TV/Internet
culture has led to a complete devaluation of reading in our society, how students are so thoroughly literal-minded in their reading, how they believe that reading means putting their eyes on all of the words through the end of the required passage, and so on. One particularly salient aspect attitude is the aforementioned belief that students' readings are overwhelmingly expressivist and self-referential. That is, when we ask student to read critically, rather than interrogating and critiquing the substance and landscape of the text, they tend to skim over its content and move directly (and often solely) to expressing how they feel about the topics it covers and how they matter (or, bluntly, don't matter) to them personally. I have always resonated to Wayne Booth's contention in Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent that a major function of college is to drag students "kicking and screaming, out of infantile solipsism into adult membership in an inquiring community" (13). My emphasis on teaching ataraxia is conducive, I hope, toward that end.

**Teaching Critical Reading in High Schools: A Review**

The one question pertinent to all three of these attitudes is simple: Are high school students being taught to read critically? The answer is a resounding maybe. While many state boards of education, local districts, and individual schools are implementing reading-improvement initiatives for all K-12 students, including high schoolers, some features of traditional secondary school curriculum and instruction might actually impede efforts to teach students to read critically. For example, given the division of the high school curriculum into "Carnegie units," (a unit being one year of study or the equivalent in a particular subject) and given the widespread graduation requirement (not to mention the college admission requirements) of three or four years of "English," courses that go by the name of reading tend to disappear from the curriculum by junior high school at the latest. But doesn't the teaching of critical reading, one might ask, become a focus of these high school English classes, and perhaps even other courses throughout the curriculum? Again, the answer is maybe. In high school English classes, students primarily read fiction, poetry, and drama, and my sense is that the typical high school English curriculum focuses predominantly on fostering a personal response to this literature and a traditional, historical understanding of it. So, for example, if I were a high school student studying Macbeth, I might be asked to read the play in order to stimulate a composition on how I feel about the problems associated with over-ambition, or I might be led to read the play so that I could understand (and probably take an examination about) features of traditional tragic structure, early modern English vocabulary and syntax, or Shakespeare's flattering of the Stuart monarchy, who, legend has it, descended from the house of Banquo. But

I would probably not be asked to read Macbeth critically. For instance, I would almost certainly not be asked to read, say, Francis Bacon's "On Ambition" and write a paper analyzing similarities between the essay and the play, or to consider a section of Book 10 of Paradise Lost ("But what will not ambition and revenge/Descend to? who aspires must down as low/As high he soar'd, obnoxious first and last/To basest things") and write an evaluative piece, arguing that Macbeth either did or did not follow the trajectory Milton describes and that Macbeth's path might be one trod by contemporary politicians. And if I'm not being taught to do the kind of critical reading that these tasks call for in English, it's a pretty sure bet that I won't be doing it either in my other classes in the humanities, social sciences, or natural sciences, where the bulk of my reading will be in textbooks, which by their typical nature as digested food are decidedly difficult to read critically.

The English-Language Arts content standards for some states that are trying to improve students' reading abilities suggest that reading instruction in high school English ought to go beyond the sort of tame reader-response and mini-history-of-literature approaches that dominate so many classrooms. California, for example, launched its much-vaunted reading initiative in 1996, promising

- a rationale and a research base for a balanced and comprehensive approach to the teaching of early reading that incorporates:
  1. a strong literature, language, and comprehension program that includes a balance of oral and written language;
  2. an organized, explicit skills program that includes phonemic awareness, phonics, and decoding skills to address the needs of the emergent reader;
  3. ongoing diagnosis that informs teaching and assessment that ensures accountability; and
  4. a powerful early intervention program that provides individual tutoring for children at risk of reading failure.

*(California Reading Initiative)*

At the 11th- and 12th-grade levels, this initiative is guided by standards that call for students, among other tasks, to "analyze both the features and the rhetorical devices of different types of public documents ... and the way in which authors used those features and devices"; "to make warranted and reasonable assertions about the author's arguments by using elements of the text to defend and clarify interpretations"; "to analyze an author's implicit and explicit philosophical assumptions and beliefs about a subject"; "to critique the power, validity, and truthfulness of arguments set forth in public documents; their appeal to both friendly and hostile audiences; and the extent to which the arguments anticipate and address reader concerns and..."
The ur-text for teaching teachers the new paradigm in the teaching of reading is Ellin Oliver Keene and Susan Zimmerman’s *Mosaic of Thought*. Despite its age (it was published in 1997) and its focus on teaching reading with elementary school students, *Mosaic* is still being used in schools and districts throughout the country as the centerpiece of in-service instruction on the teaching of reading for faculty members K through 12. As late as spring 2000, for example, a unified (i.e., K-12) school district in the western suburbs of Chicago assigned the book to all district reading specialists and asked them to refer specifically to it in developing a system-wide reading-improvement program. Subtitled *Teaching Comprehension in a Reader’s Workshop*, the book promises, as Donald Graves puts it in his foreword, “to take [us] inside the reading process and show [us] what reading comprehension is all about” (ix). To do so, *Mosaic* offers ten chapters, each filled with compelling narratives of teachers working with young readers, defining and illustrating the strategies that effective readers use to read literature. It is these narratives that endow *Mosaic* with readability and charm—this is no dry, pedantic tome. Though the book is co-authored, it is “narrated” by a singular I (whom other characters in the book refer to as “Ellin”) and this first-person narrator tells us, for example, about how reading a Billy Collins poem reminds her of working with first-grader Tanika and that reminds her of how she was taught to read and how that old paradigm of teaching reading must now die. As the book proceeds, we read stories of Ellin’s running teacher-development workshops, Ellin’s dropping into Mimi’s class to participate in a conference where second-grader Rachel is learning how to determine importance in a text, and so on. Reading *Mosaic of Thought* is more like spending a year with a clearly excellent teacher and mentor, and less like reading a book that outlines strategies for teaching the new paradigm of cognitive, constructivist, critical reading.

The strategies are there, however. As collected in Appendix Four (the appendices are very helpful syntheses of much of the theory and research the book incorporates via its narratives), these strategies include using schemata to tap into prior knowledge, drawing inferences, asking questions of a text, determining what is important in a text, monitoring comprehension and using appropriate fix-up strategies, visualizing and creating mental images while reading, and synthesizing one’s knowledge about the literary text just read (228-31), all strategies, *Mosaic* argues, that successful readers use when they encounter and enjoy literature. These strategies coalesce in one very teachable feature of *Mosaic*, the feature that is, in some respects, the book’s calling card: the three types of connections that successful readers make with a piece of literature—text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world (27). That is, a successful reader begins the process of comprehending and interpreting a piece of literature by asking, “How does
this piece of literature connect to me? How does this piece of literature remind me of something else I have read? How does this piece of literature remind me of something going on in the world beyond the text?" By explicitly drawing these connections, a young reader of literature develops a sense of ownership of the text and therefore is motivated to activate the strategies needed to understand it. Many college composition courses do not require students to read or write about literature but instead usually introduce them to non-fiction prose embodied in public-discourse or academic-discourse genres, nonetheless, if the students I have taught in composition were able to make these kinds of connections, employ the aforementioned metacognitive strategies, and be aware that they were doing so, I would have been delighted.

Despite the good sense, clear thinking, and engaging writing that Mosaic demonstrates, when I contrast the theory and philosophy of reading it develops with the kind of critical reading that I hope college composition students can engage in, I am slightly uneasy about a handful of its features. On the most superficial level, I must note that Mosaic is largely a book about teaching elementary students how to read literary works, and I wonder whether late adolescents—high school juniors and seniors and college freshmen—who are encountering challenging non-fiction prose for the first time ought to enact precisely the same strategies as the book’s target population. On a more complex level, though, I question whether the type of reader Mosaic is designed to foster—one who reads principally to reduce ambiguity and achieve closure with a central idea, one who makes primarily personal associative connections to a text, one who is not taught the importance of taking a detached, disinterested view of a topic—will do as well as he or she could with critical reading in college. For example, a summary of reading research on the book’s seven metacognitive strategies strongly preaches a doctrine of closure. "Proficient readers . . . evaluate the adequacy of the model of meaning they have developed”; they “focus their reading and . . . exclude peripheral or unimportant details from memory”; they “attend to the most important information and to the clarity of the synthesis itself”; they use “fix-up strategies . . . to best solve a given problem in a given reading situation” (22-23). While I admire the new, cognitive, constructivist paradigm of the teaching of reading that underlies these admonitions, I am nevertheless taken aback by the discourse of the chase inherent in them. The main idea, the gist, the thesis of a text seems an elusive object that the proficient reader needs to capture, not an entity that a successful reader needs to encounter and enter into conversation with. And no matter whether one sees the main idea as something to capture and know or meet and greet, Mosaic offers relatively little guidance in how to scrutinize or interrogate the gist. Throughout the book (a prime example begins with the story of a 14-year-old named Helen responding to an adolescent novel, Cold Sassy Tree, by Olive Ann Burns), the narratives describing how proficient readers draw the text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections consistently begin with the phrase “this reminds me” and regularly revert to personal, often highly emotional, moments in the exemplary reader’s life. While I do not dismiss the importance of forging some kind of special, private connection to a text, I also think it vital, to use Booth’s phrase again, to pull students out of completely solipsistic readings and to teach them how to balance the personal vividness of an emotional connection to a work with the vitality that comes from scrutinizing and interrogating a text’s central ideas as they are played out in various public forums. In summary, while it may be a grand idea to lead elementary school students to comprehend literature by responding to it emotionally, I wonder when reading instruction begins to move students toward comprehension as calm, disinterested inquiry.

Almost as if she sensed that Mosaic is not quite appropriate for helping to shape critical reading instruction at the high school level, a colleague of Keene’s, Cris Tovani, produced a volume titled I Read It, But I Don’t Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers, which is now finding its way to the center of in-service sessions in districts and schools. Tovani’s book is theoretically solid from the outset. Early on, under the heading of “Redesigning Reading,” she rehearses the seven strategies of metacognitive, constructivist reading that Keene had adapted from the work of reading theorist David Pearson and his colleagues (17). After setting this theoretical stage for her book, under the heading of “Shouldn’t They Have Learned This in Elementary School?” she takes some pains to explain to an audience of high school teachers why they need to consider themselves teachers of critical reading: Adolescents, Tovani explains, may not have sophisticated enough comprehension strategies to unlock meaning; they may lack sufficient background knowledge to make interpretive connections; they may not recognize organizational patterns in a text that provide clues to meaning; and, most importantly, they may not recognize the purpose they are supposed to accomplish with their reading (19-20). Building on this twin edifice of theory and exigence, Tovani proceeds to explain an array of tremendously helpful pedagogical strategies that all high school teachers can teach their students. For example, she unpacks six cues that students can attend to when they’re “stuck” in reading a text (38); she shows teachers how to teach students to converse, even argue, with a text (42); she explains with great finesse the differences among inferences that are “text-bound, outlandish, or just right” (103-04). To her credit, Tovani structures each chapter so that it neither dumbs down the reading theory it develops nor turns reading instruction into a worksheet festival. At the end of each chapter, under the heading “What
Works,” she provides a pithy summary of each of the chapter’s major principles and then offers a clear, useful “teaching point” for each one.

Despite the many laudable features in I Read It, But I Don’t Get It, I still find myself taking issue with a handful of its principles on the ground that they don’t quite get at the type of critical reading I hope students in college composition (and beyond) will do. Four aspects of the book give me pause. First, in explaining how important it is to give students license to listen to the “voices” they hear as they read, Tovani hints that it’s probably not a good idea for a student to attend to a “distracting voice,” one that “begins with a conversation with the reading but gets distracted by a connection, a question, or an idea” because “[s]oon the reader begins to think about something unrelated to the text” (45). I wonder whether such distractions are necessarily such a bad thing. The potential distraction, it seems to me, can turn into a strong card to play for the person who’s reading a text with an assaying eye, looking for the connection, the question, the idea that not everyone might see and that might generate the reader’s own critical take on the topic at hand. Second, a great deal of the book’s pedagogy focuses on reducing or eliminating students’ confusion as they read. As Tovani puts it in one of her “teaching points,” “Good readers know it is their job to monitor comprehension. They know when they are making sense of their reading, and they know when they are confused. Good readers don’t disengage or ignore their confusion. They acknowledge it so they can eliminate it” (47). To do away with most confusion is, of course, a noble goal in reading. But I wonder, as I look at the challenging pieces of non-fiction prose that students encounter initially in college composition and later in courses throughout the curriculum, whether a modicum of perplexity isn’t appropriate in reading—if really capable, critical readers in college aren’t actually motivated to read more diligently and carefully if they can’t quite come to closure on an occasional idea in a text. One of my old professors used to refer to texts occasionally as “dense, but worth the effort.” Does this density cause students to remain in a state of confusion a bit longer than they might like, only to feel a sense of, well, victory when they break through the confusion and see the connection, the issue that had been eluding them? Third, as does Mosaic, I Read It, But I Don’t Get It teaches students to draw the three types of connections—text-to-self, text-to-world, and text-to-text—by looking for places in a literary work where a reader can say “this reminds me.” Tovani demonstrates this process by showing us her own annotations on “Valentine for Ernest Mann,” a poem by Naomi Shahib Nye. Beside the poem’s opening stanza ("You can’t order a poem like you order a taco/ Walk up to the counter, say, ‘I’ll take two’/ and expect it to be handed back to you on a shiny plate"); Tovani writes, “This reminds me of a drive-thru in San Diego. It’s right by the beach and swimmers can walk up to the window” (68). Beside the beginning of the poem’s third stanza (“Once I knew a man who gave his wife/two skunks for a valentine”), Tovani writes, “This reminds me of the Christmas I received a cappuccino maker” (68). Beside Nye’s line “Nothing was ugly just because the world said so,” Tovani writes, “This reminds me of when I thought black oil was beautiful” (69). While Tovani is undoubtedly right when she asserts that such connections help her “bring meaning to the words instead of expecting meaning to reside in the words” (69), nonetheless, these all strike me solely as text-to-self connections, liaisons that might energize the reading for students but would do nothing to draw them out of themselves and place them, at least for a moment, in a balanced state of open, disinterested aataraxia. Fourth, as with Mosaic, the emphasis in I Read It, But I Don’t Get It lies very heavily on reading imaginative fiction and poetry; the book does little to show its readers how to teach students to make the three types of connections and apply the seven metacognitive strategies to non-fiction prose, whether from public-, academic-, or professional-discourse realms. For example, the chapter on teaching students to make inferences illustrates each of its principles with an anecdote about reading fictional prose narratives. Though it could be an extremely helpful book for teachers in all content areas who want to help their students read all primary texts (in contrast to textbooks) critically, I suspect that teachers from the content areas might see I Read It, But I Don’t Get It as a book that mostly speaks to teachers of the traditional English-class canon of fiction, poetry, and drama.

**BUILDING ON THE NEW-PARADIGM IN COLLEGE COMPOSITION**

Should the teaching of critical reading be a planned, purposeful part of college composition? Clearly, the knee-jerk response is yes. If the watercooler talk is correct—that is, if we find that our incoming students seem unable to engage, converse, or take issue with the challenging texts we set before them (a parenthetical question: Should we be giving our students a reading “diagnostic” at the beginning of the course?)—then we need to teach them. There is nothing productive, I think, in the position that students should have mastered critical reading in high school or that it’s somebody else’s job to teach them. But before we just say yes and head off to think about curricula, pedagogies, and materials, I’d urge us as a profession to confront the larger question: Why do we ask students to read critically in composition courses? What function does critical reading play in our writing pedagogy? During the many years I served as a writing program administrator and had the responsibility of overseeing the instructors’ work, I’d regularly see days on their syllabi given over to “discussing” a reading, either as a whole-class or small-group activity. “What exactly do you mean by this?” I’d ask an instructor. “What do you hope the students will do with
the material they read critically? How does this ‘discussion’ relate to what they are supposed to write?’ Frequently after a moment of flummoxed silence, the instructor would say something along the lines of “Well, I want them to evaluate the evidence the writer uses to support her thesis,” or “I want them to respond to the reading’s ideas in their own papers,” or “I want them to compare and contrast the tone and stance of this reading with another one,” and so on. I would see these occasions as teachable moments with the instructors and try to help them understand that just as writing teachers don’t only examine the products of student writing but also coach them through the process, so also must writing teachers not only ask students to bring to a discussion the products of their reading but also lead students through a process that generates these products.

Are the seven metacognitive strategies inscribed in Mosaic of Thought and I Read It, But I Don’t Get It a good starting point for this teaching? You bet. A savvy composition instructor who wants to help his or her students develop a critical reading process—a process that would help the students get the ideas they are supposed to evaluate, respond to, compare and contrast, and so on—could purposefully teach students to use schemata to organize their knowledge on the reading’s topic, to draw inferences, ask questions, determine importance, monitor and fix up comprehension, create mental images, and synthesize their thoughts. Are the three types of connections useful teaching tools? No doubt. Inquiring into the relation of text to self, text to text, and text to world seems useful and heuristic.

But, if once again the water-cooler conversations are correct, composition students may be adept at making the first of these connections but rather hesitant to move on to the latter two. Isn’t it important to ask a college student to connect the ideas in a text to his or her sense of self? Of course. But if we believe that getting a college education is a process of reconstructing and expanding one’s sense of self, rather than simply reproducing it time and again, then we ought to be working to lead students out of their solipsism, away from strictly personal interactions with a text. Let me conclude by mentioning two books that could help composition teachers think about teaching critical reading in general and helping students forge text-to-world and text-to-text connections in particular. The first is a fascinating book, now ten years old but largely unknown in composition studies, called Rereading. Its author, Matei Calinescu, is a literary critic, a modernist, by training, but his book, as its title hints, is about readings, not readings. Calinescu’s work provides a refreshing counterpoint to anyone, teacher or student alike, who thinks that one should read to reach closure efficiently, to eliminate confusion and ambiguity. A rereading (or more than one), he explains, represents “an attempt to answer in a new, original manner at least some of the major questions raised by the text, questions that readers

or rereaders can afford to leave unanswered without diminishing the pleasure they derive from going through a text” (16). Particularly intriguing is Calinescu’s discussion of the “ludic poetics of rereading,” which “involve comparisons and contrasts between types of texts and types of reading and rereading, including various possibilities of misreading and, more dangerously, misrereading” (131–32). The second is a new collection, Intertexts: Reading Pedagogy in College Classrooms, edited by Marguerite Helmers. In her introduction, “Representing Reading: An Introduction to the Difficulties of Discipline,” Helmers calls, as I do above, for “teachers of college English . . . to move readers from a level of reading in which they act upon text in limited, personal ways to more sophisticated levels of reading in which they are able to distinguish between and articulate varying purposes for reading” (4). In the same collection, Kathleen McCormick in “Closer Than Close Reading: Historical Analysis, Cultural Analysis, and Symptomatic Reading in the Undergraduate Classroom,” demonstrates three approaches to the teaching of critical reading that lead students to analyze “the situatedness—the cultural embeddedness—of their own perspectives” (34), to connect their own beliefs and practices “to other beliefs, practices, and assumptions that are occurring at the same point in time” (35), and to see texts as “symptoms of larger cultural tensions, to read the text for ‘what it does not say,’ but which is nonetheless an essential part of its ideological underpinning” (38). Both of these books show the way toward ataraxia, a 2400-year-old new goal for college composition.

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Works Cited


