

Revisiting the Reading Leap from High School to College

by April Heaney

In 2008 and 2009, teachers across the state of Wyoming met to discuss reading trends at the secondary and college level and participate in cross disciplinary workshops focused on approaches to teaching critical reading. These productive discussions revealed several specific areas where the reading transition from high school to college is most “steep” for our students.

Many benchmarks, both local and national, point to an increasing gap in pre- and post- secondary students’ reading habits and skills. In Wyoming, for example, only 45% of students in 2009 were prepared for college-level reading based on ACT results. Reading scores on the Proficiency Assessments for Wyoming Students (PAWS) also fell in almost all grades in 2009, causing concern for teachers and administrators across the state. National assessments like the National Assessment of Educational Progress show disturbing reading trends for low income students, as well as for males, whose scores fall farther below their female peers’ with each grade.

Some literacy scholars point to standardized assessment practices instituted by No Child Left Behind as the primary cause for current reading challenges. Others cite changing literacy habits in the U.S. instigated by technology and emphasis on written communication (most notably Deborah Brandt’s research in *Literacy in American Lives*), and still others believe that Millennial students experience little practice in self-regulation in an emerging “culture of self esteem.”

Reading Outside of Class

Many Wyoming high school teachers report diminishing out-of-class reading assignments at the secondary level. Some of the varied reasons for a decline in traditional homework include more working students, more students living independently from parents, and a radical increase in the number of out-of-class commitments. High schools in some cases are restructuring the traditional day to include focused reading and homework time, so that students have opportunities to complete readings and assignments in a guided environment. However, a decrease in out-of-class work at the secondary level leads to a significant leap in habits and responsibility in the first year of college—especially when students are also facing a spike in the sheer volume of reading expected in college courses.

Critical Response Skills

In addition to “external” habits for reading, there is some evidence that PAWS and ACT assessments are offering poor opportunities for students to practice critical thinking in response to reading. For example, during the fall 2009 Reading Institute at UW, plenary speaker David Jolliffe offered data on the percentage of questions on the ACT Grade 11 Literacy Exam that prompt students to “construct knowledge” vs. “reproduce knowledge.” Jolliffe reported that only 46% of the questions required students to exercise critical thinking in choosing or developing responses to the reading. Some secondary teachers steeped in curriculum designed to prepare students for these assessments spend a good deal of their time on reproduction exercises instead of fostering more critical approaches to texts.

Disciplinary Silos

Instructors at the secondary and post-secondary levels express strong interest in dissolving disciplinary boundaries in approaching critical reading instruction. It’s clear that students benefit not only from repeated exposure to reading strategies across disciplines, but from integrated inquiry projects that bring in issues and skills from several disciplines. As one teacher stated, “reading is no longer the job of the English teacher alone. Every educator shares responsibility for teaching students to be critical and capable readers of texts in the discipline.” At the secondary level, several schools in the state are making inroads toward bolstering integrated reading instruction, including Riverton High School, Whiting High School (Laramie), and East Junior High (Casper). At the University, Freshman Interest Groups and other learning communities offer rich opportunities for collaborative reading approaches and themes, and instructors can also consider developing multi-discipline units involving collaboration with other faculty (as guest speakers, planning aids, or collaborators in reading strategies) or community members.

Practical Strategies for Strengthening Critical Reading

Teach annotation

According to research on instructional strategies, teaching students to make brief, informal notes as they read is the most powerful tool for promoting critical and active reading (Wilhelm 2008, Flippo and Caverly 1999). As opposed to underlining and highlighting alone, marginal annotations encourage students to perform several tasks as they read: summary, question, connect to other texts, and respond personally. Students (and teachers) uncomfortable with writing in books can use sticky notes attached to key pages in the text. To teach annotation successfully, instructors must provide guided practice and allow students some flexibility to develop an individual style. In addition, students often benefit from guiding questions to consider as they read and annotate a text—these questions might relate to exam questions or to an upcoming in-class exercise that asks students to use their annotations.

Make accountability meaningful

Students readily admit they often need some accountability to complete assigned readings. However, quizzes and exams that smack of punishment or “pure” accountability deflate students’ engagement—and can even backfire in lower overall investment in the course. Reading annotations connected to in-class writings, guided note-taking, and timed mini-presentations in class are some examples of approaches that encourage critical response and simultaneously increase engagement.

Design inquiry units around readings

As opposed to focusing class units around a “topic,” inquiry units focus on a broad, relevant question that connects readings and allows students to explore an issue from many angles—without a prescribed outcome. Instructors must be willing to devote time to multiple forms of research (observations and interviews as well as secondary research), and be somewhat open to letting students take some control in navigating the investigation.

Talk to students about the physical process of reading

Brainstorming how reading differs in college courses, as well as the potential benefits for learning effective reading habits can set the stage for better reading early in the semester. Help students understand the time and concentration necessary to really engage with course texts—encourage them to block out periods of time between classes to stay on campus and work on reading. Students rarely think about the power of “distraction desperation” that leads them to invite a stream of interruptions during reading (freshmen in a LeaRN poll report being interrupted every 5-8 minutes during schoolwork). Consider inviting in a small panel of former students who succeeded in your course to talk about their best tips.

Resources

Brandt, Deborah. *Literacy in American Lives*. New York: Cambridge, 2001.

Flippo, Rona and David Caverly, eds. *Handbook of College Reading and Study Strategy Research*. Mahwah: Erlbaum, 1999.

LeaRN Resources for Teaching Critical Reading: [Teaching Critical Reading at the College Level](#)

Wilhelm, Jeffrey D. *You Gotta BE the Book: Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading With Adolescents*. Columbia, 2008.